


The
**LAWLESS
HAND**

**WILLIAM
LE QUEUX**

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*THE
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THE LAWLESS HAND

BY
WILLIAM LE QUEUX



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CHAPTER ONE

A STRANGE PROXY

IN the luxurious lounge of the exclusive Windsor Club in Piccadilly, one stormy November night, two men sat and talked. They had dined two hours previously, and now one of them looked at his watch and, rising, said he must go.

"Are you sure, Raymond?" his companion asked him.

"Yes," replied the man who had risen, "I want to go to a certain club." Then turning with a wry smile to his companion, he added: "—in the course of my duties."

There was a great disparity between the two men. The man who had been addressed as "Raymond" was stockily-built, thick-set, with black hair, turning prematurely grey, and piercing black eyes. He was about thirty years of age, possibly a little more, but his clean-shaven, clear-cut face was deeply-lined, and in it you could see that he was a man who had lived a very eventful life.

His companion was of quite a different type. Tall, also clean-shaven, but with rather a round face, he had brown hair, and in marked contrast to his friend, his eyes were large, blue-grey and very kindly. Indeed, the very first glance at Hugh Valentroyd inspired

confidence. His was an open, honest countenance, and good humour and generosity were plainly to be read in it.

Valentroyd was also a rich man, for on the death of his late uncle, to whom he had acted as a secretary, he had inherited considerable estates in Worcestershire and a fine town house in Curzon Square.

Raymond Gaunt and he had been friends at Eton, where they were contemporaries.

They had served in the army together during the War, and although their ways were from that time on separate paths, yet they occasionally met at the Windsor Club and arranged to spend an evening together.

Raymond Gaunt was comparatively poor, and Hugh knew that he had got some sort of a berth either in the special department of Scotland Yard, or the Secret Service, when he left the Army. He did not know quite what, but he knew that Raymond's duties accounted for his lightning visits to all sorts of unlikely places, both in England and on the Continent, where, indeed, he had frequently met him.

"You know, Raymond," he said, "I often envy you. I, myself, get very weary of a comparatively aimless life. When the old uncle was alive, my time was full, but now—well, I often even find myself looking back affectionately on the war-days, which were, at any rate, full of action."

"My dear chap, you little know what you envy," Raymond replied. "You are, indeed, to be envied. I might well envy *you*—you have wealth, health, freedom. You can dabble in politics, you can travel. Why, with half your opportunities I would live an easy life, and if I wanted a little pleasant and simple distraction I

would go to Africa and shoot big game, or explore the Aztec country of South America or something." Both men laughed, then Hugh said:

"Yes, old man, but, seriously, yours must be a romantic existence."

"Huh!" Raymond sniffed. "Romance indeed! My dear chap, don't be misled by magazine articles. The criminal world, which is unfortunately the world that it is my lot to be interested in, is not a romantic world. War, they say, has its romantic side, but you remember the suffering and the Flanders mud more than you remember any fleeting romantic aspect of war, don't you?" Hugh nodded. "And so it is with crime, and criminals," Raymond Gaunt said. "In reality the whole thing is based on greed, cruelty and utter sordidness."

"But I thought the ordinary detectives dealt with that sort of business," said Hugh. "I thought you only had to deal with very special matters, that were political, and occurred only once in a while."

"My dear chap," Gaunt said. "The whole thing is hopelessly involved. The well-placed criminal is frequently the associate of the street pick-pocket. Sometimes, indeed, he directs him. I am going to a club now. In that club there are members who are Peers of the Realm, and there are adventuresses and street-hawkers—but, my dear chap, I must go. I am late."

"If the rain has stopped, I will walk along with you," said Hugh. "I could do with a blow—this place is comfortable but stuffy."

"Right," said Gaunt, and the two friends took their overcoats from the peg and stepped out into Piccadilly.

The rain had ceased, but there was a threat of more. The wind blew gustily, and few people were afoot.

The two men walked in the direction of Piccadilly Circus, and both were silent after commenting on the weather. They had walked perhaps half way to the Circus when a girl almost sprang, so quickly did she step, from a doorway, and, placing herself before Hugh, who was walking nearest the buildings, said:

"Oh, may I speak to you a minute?"

Momentarily taken off his guard, he was about to turn away, and, indeed, Raymond Gaunt, with a slight shrug, had already moved on, when he saw, in the pale face turned up to his, a shrinking, pained expression, as though he had struck her, and the girl stepped back. Hugh stopped dead, turned to her, and said:

"Please forgive me. I had no intention of being rude. Did you want to speak to me?"

"Yes," she replied, and as Hugh had a better chance to examine her appearance now, he saw that she was shabbily-dressed in a navy-blue costume, and wore a blue hat. On her pale cheeks there was not a vestige of colour. Her lips seemed blue with cold, and her fine violet eyes, which were large and beautiful, were essentially honest. There was no trace here of the adventuress, Hugh decided, and in very kindly tones he said:

"What can I do for you, please?"

"Give me twopence, if you will, for my 'bus fare home."

The reply was startling in its frank simplicity, no less than in its modesty. Hugh felt that there was some deep trouble here.

"Just excuse me a moment," he said, and hurrying after Gaunt, told him he had met a girl who was apparently ill, and that he intended to see her safely home.

Raymond Gaunt laughed disagreeably.

"Take my advice and leave distressed maidens alone in Piccadilly, my friend," he said. But with an exclamation of annoyance Hugh bade him "good night" and returned to the girl. She was standing where he had left her.

"Now, look here," Hugh began. "I'll see you home. Where do you live? We can get a taxi here."

"Thank you so much," the girl replied, and made to walk along by his side to the cab-rank he indicated. As she walked, however, she swayed, and would have fallen had he not put his arm out and caught her.

"My dear girl," he said. "What's the matter? Why, I believe you're hungry—almost fainting. When did you last have a meal?"

"I had a cup of tea this morning," faintly murmured the girl.

"Cup of tea this morning! Great heavens!" Hugh exclaimed. "Here! taxi!" as a taxi cruising for a fare came along. "Drive to Oddenino's, will you?"

They got into the taxi and were shortly established at one of the small tables in the entry to Oddenino's Restaurant.

"Oh, what time is it?" anxiously asked the girl. "I must, *must* be in by eleven."

"It is only ten past ten," replied Hugh, "and I'll see you're in by eleven all right. Now don't worry any more about that. What will you have to eat? And what to drink?"

"Oh, I think anything," replied his companion, "and a cup of coffee to drink, please."

This was no adventuress, Hugh had known instinctively before, but now he was certain. Girls of that type do not express gratitude for anything and ask

for cups of coffee. Hugh ordered some chicken sandwiches and coffee, and thoughtfully let her eat without disturbing her. The girl ate almost ravenously, and when she had done, there were tears in her eyes, as she tried to thank him.

"Nonsense," said Hugh. "Now instead of that, why don't you tell me what the trouble is, and I will try to help you?"

"How can you help me?" the girl declared bitterly. "No one can help me. Oh, I am so sick of everything."

"I don't know how I can help you until I know what your difficulties are," replied Hugh, "but I assure you I would do anything I could. What is the matter? Tell me."

"Oh, I can't," replied the girl. "I simply can't tell anyone. My troubles are not ordinary ones. I don't think anyone living could help me. What time is it?"

"Almost twenty to eleven," replied Hugh. "Now, won't you tell me your name—mine is Hugh Valentynd."

"Oh, I really must go now," replied the girl, ignoring his request for her name. "The door is shut at eleven o'clock sharp, and Mrs. Shaw is a dreadful woman."

"That's all right," replied Hugh, "we can get there if it's anywhere near. Where is it you live?"

"Chapel Street, off the Edgware Road," replied the girl.

"Oh, we can do that in ten minutes easily," said Hugh. "But why the hurry? Why not let me talk to Mrs. Shaw?"

"Oh! no! no! no!" she replied in tones of horror. "You don't understand. She is a dreadful woman. There are eight of us girls who sleep in one room.

We all give her a shilling in the morning to secure our beds for that night, and unless we are in by eleven, she shuts the door. She is terrible. I must go, really."

"Very well," replied Hugh. "Come along." He paid the bill, then called a taxi, and ordered the driver to proceed to Chapel Street, Edgware Road.

When they were seated in the taxi, he said:

"How long have you been at this dreadful place?"

"Three days," she replied. "I am trying to find work; it is awfully hard to find work."

Hugh searched his pockets, and, to his annoyance, found that he had only a trivial amount of silver. He had left his note-case in his room, where he dressed before meeting Gaunt.

"Will you please do me two favours," he said. "One, accept this small bit of change. It's all I have in my pockets. Stupidly I forgot to put my pocket-book in this suit. The other is to allow me to drive you round to my place, now, to get you something, or if you simply insist upon being at Mrs. Shaw's place by eleven, meet me to-morrow. Now, will you?"

"Oh, you're too kind, really." Tears again welled up in the girl's large violet eyes as she took the few shillings that Hugh pressed on her. "I must be in by eleven."

"Then will you promise to meet me to-morrow?" he asked.

"Yes. I'll try."

"No, promise!"

"Very well then, in the afternoon."

"Now please remember, I shall be terribly disappointed if you don't turn up. What time shall we say—and where?"

"Oh! about five o'clock," she answered. "Will that do?"

"Admirably," said Hugh. "Now where?"

"Oh, somewhere near where we met to-night."

"Good," he said. "Five o'clock to-morrow at Piccadilly Circus station. Now promise again."

The girl almost laughed as she gave the required assurance. "Five o'clock Piccadilly Tube to-morrow—oh, stop the taxi, we're there."

Hugh stopped the cab and the girl stepped out, turning large, frightened eyes in the direction of a drab-looking house twenty or thirty yards along on the other side of the street, where a large, buxom woman was standing, arms akimbo, on the top of a short flight of steps, framed in a narrow, open doorway.

"Goodness! She's there—am I too late?" The girl's terror was pitiful to see, and Hugh wished he could have had her permission to go with her and see her safely inside.

"No! no! it still wants five minutes to eleven," he said reassuringly. "Don't forget—five o'clock to-morrow." A moment later he saw the stout woman stand to one side as the slim figure passed her and disappeared into the dark interior of the dingy house.

It was late that night when Hugh Valentroyd went to bed, and he was conscious all the following day of an impatience with everything else save his five o'clock appointment. A quarter to the hour found him pacing the pavements of Piccadilly Circus. Wearily the moments passed and five o'clock came, but no sign of the girl. Five minutes past and still no sign.

A tall, distinguished-looking girl in brown passed him half a dozen times. She also seemed to be awaiting someone. She was of a striking type of real beauty,

dark eyes and hair, a good-humoured mouth—perhaps rather large, but firm. She glanced once or twice curiously at him, and he began to wonder if she might have a message for him. But the thought was impossible—she was of another type. This girl was rich, as was evident from her clothes and general appearance. Could it be that she was the same girl—made up in some way. No—but why should the girl in the blue hat not turn up and this one keep glancing at him?

When half-past five came, and the girl still remained strolling up and down, Hugh determined to make absolutely sure. He went up to her the next time she passed him, and, raising his hat, addressed her.

“You are not the girl that I spoke to in Piccadilly last night, are you?”

She laughed outright, but in cultured tones said: “No, indeed I’m not. I’m waiting here for someone I had to meet at five.”

“I also had to meet this lady at five,” said Hugh. “Please forgive me for addressing you.”

“Of course,” said the tall girl, “but don’t you think we’ve both waited long enough? I think it would be a jolly good idea if we made the best of a bad job by going and having tea together—then I would forgive you for addressing me.”

CHAPTER TWO

DEATH IN ITS SWIFTNESS

SOMEWHAT taken aback by the frank suggestion of the girl that they should take tea together, Hugh Valentroyd looked rather suspiciously into the dark, laughing eyes which seemed to mock and challenge him at the same time. Yet the handsome, rather bold face seemed so essentially jolly and good-humoured, in rather an unconventional sort of way, that he was disarmed, and, feeling rather piqued at the failure of the girl in the blue hat to turn up, he replied with a short laugh:

"Of course—a jolly good suggestion. Where shall we go?"

"Anywhere—I don't mind in the least," replied the dark girl.

"Then shall we make it Rumpelmeyers's or the Milan, or would you prefer one of the dance teas?" asked Hugh.

"Oh! let us go somewhere where we can talk," said the girl. "I dislike dance teas—always a lot of unpleasant people shuffling about, and blaring jazz bands, it is simply impossible to talk there."

"Then we'll go to the Milan," replied Hugh, a little surprised that this girl wanted to talk. What could she have to talk about? Or was it just a pose? She looked the type of modern girl who would dance on every possible occasion.

Hailing a taxi, Valentroyd ordered the driver to go to the Milan, and in a few minutes they were seated in a quiet corner of the luxurious lounge of that mammoth hotel, sheltered from the general gaze of the room by palms.

Hugh was not long in discovering that this girl, whose name she told him was Eunice de Laine, had travelled widely, was cultured, and a charming companion. He had casually mentioned Mentone, and she had quickly shown him there was not a nook or cranny of either the French or Italian Riviera that she did not know inside out.

He had always longed to do the Pacific, and always something had prevented him. To his great pleasure and surprise this jolly girl, who seemed so young to have travelled so far, told him of the wonderful charm of the South Sea Isles, told him all he had read in books of travel, and far more. She spoke of her intimate knowledge of little islands off the beaten track where schooners only called once in a while—sometimes at intervals of years—to pick up pearls, shell and copra, and Hugh listened entranced.

Suddenly he glanced at his watch and saw that it was nearly seven o'clock. The hours had passed incredibly quickly, and, full of compunction, Hugh apologised to his newly-found friend, feeling that he must have trespassed unconscionably on her time.

"My dear man," she said, "I have had a most interesting time, I assure you. I love yarning away about my wanderings; it is like living there over again, but I am afraid I bore my listeners usually."

"Oh, no, quite impossible," said Hugh. "I cannot think of any more entrancing subject than travelling, and adventures incurred in travelling, to talk about."

"Then I have been fortunate in my victim this time," returned Eunice, rising, and they both laughed.

"Look here," said Hugh. "You must let me drive you somewhere. Where do you want to go—home? Or have you some engagement?"

"I am, happily, free," she replied, "and now I will plunge into some interesting little café where one can dine without dressing, and watch all the interesting people who foregather there."

"Then let us take the 'plunge' together," said Hugh. "I know one or two quite good places in Soho."

Soon they were duly established at a table in the corner of a remote and rather extraordinary little restaurant, and served with a very excellent dinner. Hugh saw that the *maître d'hôtel* knew his friend Eunice de Laine, and was markedly respectful to her.

Frequently Hugh had dined at this restaurant, and it was always good, but never equal to to-night. His curiosity being aroused, he said:

"Antoine evidently recognises a valuable patron in you, Miss de Laine."

She laughed shortly, and briefly replied:

"Oh, I've been here a few times—but I'm afraid 'valuable patron' is rather an exaggeration."

"Have you come here alone before or with friends?" asked Hugh, rather clumsily, trying to find something out about this interesting girl's connections.

"Oh, both," she replied, "and you?"

Hugh recognised that she had sensed his motive in asking the question, and cleverly turned the tables on him. It was clear that she did not wish to talk about her connections.

"Very well, then," he thought; "after all, it's her own business." Aloud he said: "I've always been alone,

as a matter of fact. Indeed, all my excursions into restaurants have been alone except for one friend of mine who sometimes accompanies me, and he has never been here with me. Soho is not exactly the place to take one's — eh — well — shall I say 'conventional' friends, is it?"

Eunice laughed merrily.

Hugh wondered what it was in his reply that had provoked this outburst. Presently she subsided, and said—still half-laughing:

"You poor, poor man—nothing but conventional friends—except one—and that's a 'he.'"

"I don't mean that all my friends are stodgy," Hugh replied, feeling rather annoyed that she should label him a sort of relic of a past age cloaked in conventionality. "I simply mean that when one gives a dinner out, one goes to an ordinary place—like one of the usual restaurants, or hotels, or clubs—there's nothing remarkable in that, is there?"

"Don't get humpy, dear, nice Mr. Hugh Valentroyd—nice, if just a wee bit 'conventional,'" railingly replied Eunice, but again her obvious good humour overpowered the sting of the words. "Of course I know what you mean, but it was the way you said 'conventional friends.'" Eunice mimicked him delightfully, and again went off into peals of laughter.

Hugh waited, laughing in spite of himself, for this girl's laughter was infectious. Presently she said:

"Forgive me; I know I'm a beast really to rag you like this, but seriously, unless I had friends that I could rely on to be just—oh, utterly unconventional upon occasion, I think sometimes I should die of ennui in London."

"Are you so tied to London now, then?" asked Hugh.

"Oh no, I may go away again quite soon," she replied. "I don't know yet, but that's just it. When you're away events move so rapidly. Life is so full, and in London it's often just waiting, waiting, waiting."

"Waiting for what?" Hugh asked.

"Oh, waiting for something to turn up, I suppose," said Eunice. Then, as she saw he was about to question her further, she asked him:

"Why don't you travel more? You are not tied, are you?"

"Well, until recently," Hugh told her, "I acted as secretary to my invalid uncle and my time was thus restricted. I went with him a few times to the South of France, and I read to him stories of the South Seas, and we always intended to go for a voyage to there, but it was not to be, the poor old chap died just about six months ago."

"And left you all his money?" Quite frankly—with almost child-like simplicity—she asked the question that would have seemed such an unwarrantable impertinence in anyone else.

He smiled as he answered:

"And left me all his money."

"And I daresay you earned every penny of that, too—invalids are fearful; they're the limit." Eunice shuddered as if recollecting some personal experiences of a most unpleasant nature.

"Oh no," Hugh replied quickly. "The dear old boy was a great invalid, but very decent, patient as Job, and I—well, I miss him very much, to tell you the truth."

"You're a dear man, Hugh Valentroyd." Eunice rather whimsically smiled. "And when I think of all the little hussies from sixteen to sixty who will be setting

their caps at you, I positively tremble for your safety. I have a jolly good mind to have a go for you myself, to save you from them all."

They both laughed again, then Eunice said:

"Seriously, you'll be going away soon, won't you? Travelling, I mean?"

"Yes," he said, "I suppose so. When we leave here—and look at the time." They both glanced at the small oak clock on the wall, and again the hours had passed magically. Eunice repeated:

"When we leave here—where are you going?"

"I have nowhere to go at all—I am entirely at your disposal if you want to continue a quite 'unconventional' evening," he said.

"Very well, then, you may come with me to the Brick-Bat Club," said Eunice. "Ever been there?"

"No," confessed Hugh. "What's it like?"

"Oh, it's all right," the girl replied. "We needn't dress—there's always a number of people who come in morning-dress, but just one thing, don't make any acquaintances there except through me. Promise that, won't you?"

"Yes, but what do mean exactly?" Hugh wondered at the strange request.

"Oh, I can't go into that, but there are undesirable people in every night club, are there not? Well, don't talk to any people unless I introduce you."

Hugh smiled. Did this curious, laughing-eyed girl seriously consider it necessary to constitute herself his guardian? However, he said nothing more, and after some further conversation, they departed for the Brick-Bat Club.

Arriving at the club, where, apparently, the girl was well-known, they were passed through to a large

room, where numerous tables were set and a floor space cleared for dancing.

Hugh Valentroyd, who knew a little of night clubs, and had visited several, compared it with those he was acquainted with. It seemed pretty much like others of its type. If there was any specially distinctive feature it was the essentially cosmopolitan character of its clientèle.

Glancing here and there about the large room, Hugh saw Englishmen, Americans, Japanese, Chinese, members of various Latin races, obvious Germans, and the rest. That was the only striking thing about it; otherwise it seemed innocuous enough. A band was playing on a raised dais and several couples were dancing in the center of the room.

Vaguely Hugh remembered someone had told him something about the Brick-Bat. He did not remember quite what it was, or even who it was who had told him.

His companion and he being seated, they ordered some refreshment, and were soon talking of the various types they noticed in the room, and amusing each other by speculating as to the character and position of the various people. Hugh, who noticed the intense amusement of Eunice as he gave some person or other an impromptu "history," could not resist the conviction that she knew that person and was amused at the truth or obvious wildness of his summing up from appearance. Frequently he saw people motion to her.

Presently, as he looked down the long room, he saw a side door open to admit a girl who quickly crossed the corner of the room and spoke to someone at the extreme end. She was too far away for Valentroyd to hear what she said and her back was towards him,

so that he could not see her features, but there was something about the back of her head, about her slight, but wonderfully graceful figure, the funny little tilt of the head as she spoke, something in all these characteristics that convinced him that, by some remarkable coincidence, this was the girl who had spoken to him in Piccadilly. Leaning forward in his excitement, he did not notice that his companion was intently watching the girl also, that she had followed his gaze, and at first was puzzled, smiling afterwards when she saw the intensity of Hugh's preoccupation.

In a moment the girl had turned her head, and in a flash his last doubts were dispelled. There in front of him, in the Brick-Bat Club, was the girl. Incredible as it might seem, it was true—there she was, and immediately, acting on some impulse too strong to resist, companions, spectators, clubs all forgotten, Hugh Valentroyd sprang from his chair, and was just about to charge across the room to speak to her, when, from the room she had just left, a man entered.

Tall, unprepossessing, was this man, and, though he wore a dinner-jacket, he looked as if he would have been more at home in the boxing-ring. He paused for a moment, when he had closed the door behind him, looked with furtive little eyes in every direction, then, fixing them on Valentroyd's friend of the night before, reached her, grabbed her roughly by the arm, swung her round like a spinning top, whispered a couple of words to her, and piloted her back through the doorway he had just left. It was all done in a few seconds, and, though one or two people glanced from nearby tables, no one took much notice, no one seemed to dream of interfering, and everything went on as if nothing had happened.

Hugh, who, fascinated by the curious incident, had remained stock-still, deprived of the power to move, now stepped forward, his intention being to reach the room into which the girl had disappeared with her rough escort. He had, however, not taken half-a-dozen steps before he felt a hand rest on his shoulder, and, turning round, confronted his friend, Raymond Gaunt.

In a flash it occurred to him that here was another extraordinary coincidence. Here was Raymond Gaunt, who had been with him the night before when he had met the girl, and now he was here in the Brick-Bat Club. In itself Gaunt's presence was not remarkable, because Hugh knew that his duties in the Secret Service took him into all sorts of places, but that he should just turn up here a second or so after he had seen the blue hat girl—well! Before he could express his surprise, Gaunt spoke:

"What on earth are you doing here, Hugh?" he asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I came here with a lady friend!" Hugh replied, "but I've just seen a girl—the girl I spoke to last night, you know, she went through that door, and I want to speak to her."

"Wait—and listen."

Gaunt was looking sternly serious as he put out a restraining hand. "I don't know what type of 'lady friend' lumbered you along to this place, and as for the girl you insisted on talking to last night, I know nothing about her either, but you surely have heard enough of this place to avoid it. As for that room that you so airily point to—by Gad, I question if ever there was a room so iniquitous—it is called the Hawk's Nest, and men, and women, too, have been known to go in there and never—— Ah, my God! they've got

me! They've—got—me.” With a cry that was almost a shriek, Raymond Gaunt fell inert to the floor, nor did he utter another word.

In a second Hugh was on his knees beside him, opening his shirt-front and loosening his collar. In horror, he called out:

“He’s dead.”

In the room pandemonium had, in the meantime, broken out. Forgetful of “blue hat,” Hugh waited by the body of his friend, until a doctor arrived. The latter pronounced life to be extinct and questioned Hugh about Gaunt’s position and address. Then he ordered the police to be summoned forthwith.

A rather greasy-looking Italian, called Levesi, answered as manager of the club, and professed his utter ignorance of the whole affair. The police submitted Hugh to a rigid examination and asked all sorts of questions, which he did his best to answer. They warned him that he would have to appear at the inquest, then they ordered the removal of Raymond Gaunt’s body. Hugh went back to the table at which he had been sitting, but Eunice de Laine had gone. Indeed, the club was practically empty. With many conflicting emotions, Hugh returned to his home in Curzon Square.

As he entered the hall, James, the old butler, who had served his uncle during the whole of his life, aged and privileged, said:

“There’s a young person, alone, sir, unchaperoned if I may say so, sir, to see you. I may remark, sir, that in my living memory this is the first young person to come to see an unattended young gentleman, sir, unchaperoned, sir.”

“Where is she?”

"In the library, sir—if I may——" But Hugh was off—who could this be? Opening the door of the library, he confronted Eunice de Laine, walking up and down. Upon seeing him, she rushed to him:

"Don't ask any questions," she said; "just listen. You saw what happened to Raymond Gaunt. Well, he was murdered. You will certainly follow him if you attend that inquest. Slip off—slip off now. I'm going to Paris to-night. I'll expect to see you on the train or boat—goodbye." And before he could recover his breath, this remarkable girl had fled past the outraged butler into the street.

CHAPTER THREE

“WHINING WILLIE”

AFTER the events of the tragic night at the Brick-Bat Club, Hugh Valentroyd made his decision.

He carefully weighed the warning of Eunice de Laine in his mind against the manifest duty to attend the inquest on Raymond Gaunt, and finally decided to brave whatever dangers might attend him, and remain. His decision was especially prompted by the thought that the mysterious girl in the blue hat, whose acquaintance he had made so strangely, of whom he had seen so little; and yet whose personality fascinated him to such an extent, might—indeed, must—be in great danger, and might have need of him. In any event, he intended to be at hand, ready to help her if called upon. Judging by the last words of Raymond Gaunt, the Brick-Bat Club was a pest-hole, and the room into which he had seen the fragile little figure of “Blue Hat” dragged, had a peculiar significance.

The inquest had been held, and, although it had been a dreadful ordeal for Hugh, he had, as yet, encountered nothing in the nature of personal violence. There was, he thought, an explanation for this. It was that his evidence at the inquest was absolutely valueless. Had he been able to state some definite fact that would have shown the nature of Gaunt’s death, or some definite fact to prove that the club was, in Gaunt’s words, “a pest-hole,” then his life might have paid for-

feit. He did not believe for a moment that Eunice de Laine had misled him, or in any sense exaggerated his danger.

After many hours of examination of all sorts of witnesses, the Coroner's jury had brought in a verdict of "Death from natural causes," but Hugh was perfectly satisfied in his own mind that Raymond Gaunt had been murdered. There was Gaunt's own statement, and there was the statement of Eunice de Laine. He had merely said at the inquest that he was suddenly accosted by his friend, who inquired what he, Valentroyd, was doing there. He had replied that he was casually visiting the place with a lady friend, when Gaunt had vehemently condemned the club and the next moment dropped, saying, "They've got me—they've got me!" And the Coroner had said that the words might have referred either to personal enemies of the deceased man, or perhaps to some pains or other to which he might have been subject, and from which he feared mortal effect.

Hugh had consistently refrained from mentioning the Blue Hat Girl, and the room into which she had been taken. This withholding of what might be considered evidence, that his oath required him to give, was deliberate on his part, and not inspired by personal fear after Eunice's warning, for he had withheld it from the police who had interviewed him on the night of the tragedy, and before he left the club. It was deliberate policy on his part to save the girl from being mixed up in the affair at all. The doctors had given their evidence, and their view was simply "heart failure," though there was no trace of a diseased condition of the heart, nor any trace of excessive shock. It remained a mystery!

For some days Hugh refrained from taking any action, then one morning, about a week after the inquest, as he was sitting in his library writing letters, James entered with a note, hand-delivered, the messenger had said there was no reply expected. Hugh took the note, opened the envelope, and written in a small, essentially feminine handwriting, read:

“For the good of all concerned, and especially myself, never attempt to get into touch with me again.

“‘THE GIRL IN THE BLUE HAT.’”

This was, indeed, a remarkable and unexpected development. How on earth did Blue Hat know his address? But then, how had Eunice de Laine found it out? Then, why should she think it necessary to send him that note? He had been hoping to see her, it was true, but he had taken absolutely no steps to do so. It could only mean that some fresh danger was menacing Blue Hat, and, in her extremity, she feared that he might be making matters worse by trying to see her.

Worried and anxious before, Hugh was inflamed by the mysterious note, and decided that, come what might, he would find Blue Hat and save her, if necessary, in spite of herself. Not unmindful of the tragic fate of Raymond Gaunt, but strong in the belief that, if he could only see her, he could arrange to extricate her from her terrible environment, Hugh decided to ignore the note, and from that hour he haunted the vicinity of the Brick-Bat Club. During several days he had no success. Numerous people went in and came out of the club, some of whom he recognised as individuals who had formed the butts of Eunice de Laine's and his own amusing character judgments, but nobody he knew.

Always when he came near the door, he saw a consumptive-looking, cadaverous-faced match-seller whose "pitch" was on the curb just near the club entrance. Frequently, the male habitués would buy matches from this man, and they seemed often to say a word or two to him. Hugh could not help thinking that the match-seller was regarding him with a suspicious sort of look, and once or twice he noticed that some male member of the club, after speaking to the vendor, straightway shot a quick, curious glance at him before passing into the building.

After he had been watching the club entrance for several days with no result, one afternoon, in the pouring rain, Hugh stood outside, enveloped in a good mackintosh, and umbrella in hand. He could not help noticing how ill the match-seller looked. Every few minutes he would break into a frightful fit of coughing that seemed to shake him through and through. Suddenly, even while Hugh watched him, following a particularly violent paroxysm of coughing, the match-seller pitched forward into the road and fell full-length, almost in front of a swiftly-moving motor-waggon. In a second, Hugh jumped forward, gripped the man, and by a terrific effort, just managed to save both of them from being caught by the wheels of the heavy vehicle.

For several minutes, the match-seller lay on the pavement where Hugh had dragged him. The only sign of life indicated in his feeble frame was the faintly beating heart. Filled with a great compassion for this poor bit of flotsam on the human tide, Hugh asked for the help of a member of the crowd that had gathered round, and together he and the stranger lifted the prostrate man into a taxi.

Hugh took him home, put him immediately to bed

and sent for his own doctor, who diagnosed the case as one of advanced consumption, considerably aggravated by neglect and exposure. Within a couple of days the rest had so benefited the poor consumptive that he was able to get up, and, indeed, was anxious to get about his business. Hugh, however, would not hear of it, and had several long talks with the man, who told him his name was “Whining Willie.” For years he had answered to that name, and he did not resent it—on the other hand, he disliked intensely all probing for Christian names and surnames, and such-like unreal things. He was Whining Willie. Everybody who mattered called him Whining Willie, and that was good enough.

Hugh Valentroyd, keenly sensitive as he was to taking advantage of Whining Willie’s gratitude, refrained from making any inquiries about the club and the people who frequented it, although he felt sure that the match-seller could tell a lot if he cared. One day, however, after Whining Willie had been Hugh’s guest for about a week, he came through to the library in the wake of James, who declared that “this sick man I am looking after for you, sir, would like a word with you, sir.” Hugh invited Whining Willie in immediately, and having dismissed James, who withdrew rather reluctantly, disliking to leave a man whom he regarded with mixed suspicion and contempt alone with his master, motioned the match-seller to seat himself in a chair and asked him to tell him what he wanted.

“Well, it’s like this, guv’nor,” began Whining Willie, “I want to do what I can to prove how I thank you for your goodness to me, see?”

“Oh—don’t worry about that,” Hugh replied. “I only did what anyone would do to help a man who

needs a hand when one's attention is drawn to a case, like yours was to me."

"Oh no, it isn't like that at all, guv'nor," replied the consumptive. "My case has been drawn to the attention of thousands—must have been 'cause I've stood a-barking and a-coughing for years selling my matches, and nobody's done nothing for me but give me an odd bob, but you, guv'nor, you saved my life and give me a 'ome, and you are a real toff. Now I can help you a bit, not much, perhaps, but a bit."

"Really," said Hugh, "I'll be grateful for any help you can give me—tell me how you can help me?"

"Well, guv'nor, you must excuse me becos' I can't be polite-like in my way of putting things, but you've been a-hanging round the Brick-Bat Club for the young woman in the blue hat, 'aven't yer?"

Valentroyd, rather aghast at this crude statement of his interest in Blue Hat, felt like rebuking Whining Willie, but that, he considered, would be foolish. Here was a man, uncultured but intending to be genuine, who might be able to help him. What matter the form so long as the substance was right? He replied, "I certainly have met a lady in a blue hat, whom, I believe, to be a member of the Brick-Bat Club, and I am really concerned for her safety. If you can tell me how I can reach her, I shall be very grateful."

"That's right, guv'nor. I was frightened you would be vexed with me for interfering with your affairs, but I am really anxious to help yer, sir, and I'm glad you have given me the chance. Now I'm a-going to tell you all about the Brick-Bat Club, and the girl in the blue hat. Well, the Brick-Bat Club is a very curious place, sir; it is a sort o' club nobody knows anything really about—even the members. For instance, I'm

a member of the Brick-Bat Club—you wouldn't think that, would yer?"

Hugh had to confess he certainly would not have thought so, but Whining Willie, after diving into the fastnesses of his undervest, produced from some remote pocket a certificate of membership of the Brick-Bat Club.

Nodding gravely to indicate his appreciation of this announcement, Hugh waited for the match-seller to continue. In a minute or two he did so.

"Well, guv'nor, the club's for a lot of purposes; it's partly straight, partly crook, but all its members are not crooks for all that—but most is." Here a fit of coughing broke Whining Willie's narrative. Presently he went on: "Now the Blue Hat girl—she's a member—you're after her, and——"

"How do you know I'm 'after her'?" asked Hugh.

"Well, 'cos it's my job to stand outside selling matches and keeping an eye open for any stranger or detectives or anything suspicious like that. Well, when I seen you, I go inside and report, and after a bit I get the wire that you're all right—just sweet on Blue Hat. That's all—see?"

The match-seller paused until he got Hugh's somewhat amused, somewhat surprised murmur of acquiescence; then he continued:

"Now Blue Hat is reely a toff—like you, guv'nor; there's a lot of toffs in the Brick-Bat Club. Her real name is Miss Sylvia Peyton, but she always wears a blue hat and we all call her Blue Hat."

"But she isn't a crook," interrupted Hugh. "How does she come to be mixed up in that club, if you say it is frequented by crooks?"

"Who says she isn't a crook?" belligerently replied

Whining Willie. "Why shouldn't she be a crook if she wants?"

"Oh, well," said Hugh, "I simply can't believe she's a crook—she doesn't look like a crook—she can't be a crook."

"Guv'nor," returned Whining Willie, "yer don't know yer born. Listen, you've been good to me, you 'ave. If you think Blue Hat is dead straight, cut her out—you stand on me, guv'nor—I know."

"But, tell me," said Hugh, "how you can support such an absurd accusation."

"'Tisn't absurd at all," said the match-seller. "There's nothing absurd or bad in being a good crook. Now, do you want me to tell you about the club or not, guv'nor? I'm bound by an 'orrible oath not to, and I'd rather not, but you've been good to me, and I 'aven't long to hang out, anyhow, and I like Blue Hat, so I don't mind taking a chance."

"Well, the club is really formed for someone higher up even than the Hawk. The Hawk has a room off the club near the end of the main room on the right."

Hugh nodded, he remembered it was that room into which he had seen Blue Hat dragged.

Whining Willie continued: "The Hawk is an awful man; he knows everything, you can't get one over on the Hawk. There's some things I daren't tell you, but that's fer your own good—I don't care what they do to me now." Whining Willie was about to proceed when the door opened, and James, the butler, entered, carrying a tray on which lay a small sealed packet.

"This has just been left for you, sir, by an express messenger boy, who wouldn't wait for an answer, sir," he announced.

Hugh took the packet, opened it, and found a small

box lined with cotton wool. Removing the top layer of wool, there was revealed a magnificent black pearl, mounted in a claw setting, on the head of a platinum pin.

Gazing in admiration at the exquisite gem, Hugh was about to pick it up, when suddenly his eye caught sight of a tiny piece of paper lying, minutely folded, below the pearl, and this he picked up, unfolded, and found it was a cigarette-paper, covered with very fine handwriting in characteristically French style. His astonishment increased as he read on, for what he read was this:—

“Whatever expenses you incur in your knight-errantry, let this pearl defray them. Whatever means you pursue to solve the mystery of your friend’s death will only bring you disaster.”

This, Hugh felt, was a message from Blue Hat, and his first thought was one of relief, mixed with just a little disappointment, for the girl who could send valuable pearls, with cryptic messages, and imply knowledge of guilty secrets, was manifestly able to take care of herself. His train of thought was rudely interrupted by Whining Willie, who had just caught a glimpse of the contents of the box, as Hugh moved his left hand slightly. Pouncing forward, he seized his benefactor’s hand, took the box and almost squealed in his wheezily high-pitched voice, “For Gawd’s sake, guv’nor, don’t touch them claws or you’ll be as dead as that fellow was who dropped down in the Brick-Bat Club. *I know.*”

CHAPTER FOUR

AN "EAST END" SURPRISE

ASTONISHED beyond words at the dramatic outburst of Whining Willie, Valentroyd gazed at the pearl, now so sinister in its great beauty, and back again to the trembling figure.

"What on earth do you mean, Willie?" Hugh was half-frightened at the excited manner of his protégé, coupled with the dread that was plainly written on his face. Crossing the room, he took up a decanter of brandy, poured Whining Willie out a stiff peg, and was rewarded by seeing the colour gradually rise in his cheeks again.

After a fit of coughing, Whining Willie replied: "Lor, guv'nor, this is one of the secrets I daresn't tell you, if I knew, and I don't know much. I only know that whoever gets a pearl like that with a pin through it can be sure as it's all up—but listen 'ere, guv'nor, what's the note say?"

Hugh passed it to him without a word, and for several minutes Whining Willie pored over it. Finally, he turned to Valentroyd with a puzzled look. "Wot's the first part mean, guv'nor; the last part's a warning against the pearl."

"I don't exactly know," Hugh replied. "I took it to mean that the pearl would defray the cost of any little services I might render anyone. I took it to mean that, because I naturally thought it came from the

blue hat girl, and I was once able to render her a trivial service."

"Well, I don't think it's from Blue Hat at all, guv'nor, but we'll soon find out. Wot say if we put on some old togs and I'll take you straight to her—I'm sick of helping a gentleman's gentleman—old James looks down 'is long nose at me an' counts the silver twice, very obvious-like, every time I much as looks at it."

"I should like nothing better," laughed Hugh. "Tell me what to put on and where we are to go."

Whining Willie supervised his patron's toilet, and, dressed in the oldest clothes he possessed, an old cap pulled well down over his eyes, a muffler about his neck, and accompanied by the disreputable-looking figure of Whining Willie, Hugh set off on his great adventure.

By underground at first, then by tram, they penetrated the fastnesses of Poplar. Side-street after side-street was negotiated with Whining Willie leading, until finally he stopped before the door of a Chinese tea-shop owned by one rejoicing in the name of Chock Lu. Whining Willie scrutinised very carefully a book covered with Chinese characters, and ostensibly a menu, but he seemed to find something of great interest there, for presently he stepped back and, saying, "Come on, guv'nor—it's all right," entered the shop, closely followed by Hugh.

Not one of the motley assembly in that café appeared to notice the entry of Hugh Valentroyd and Whining Willie—and it *was* a motley assembly. There were Chinamen and toughs of every description and nationality; some merely talking, others gambling, all with various sorts of drink before them. Yet not

a person present in that sinister café but had mentally recorded the description of Hugh and Whining Willie, recorded the facts that matter in description—such as the tread of the feet, length of fingers, colour of eyes, set of ears to head, shape of head and other measurements that no artificial manipulation can ever conceal or disguise.

Straight through this assembly to a telephone-box walked Whining Willie, followed still by Hugh. Opening the door and motioning Valentroyd to follow, Whining Willie entered, closed the door behind them, took off an ordinary looking receiver, but turned a handle at the same time at the other side of the box. Faintly surprised, but thinking it must be some sort of antiquated instrument, Hugh watched him. "Clear," shouted Whining Willie in a loud voice, then evidently satisfied by the answer, nodded and smiled, replaced the receiver, and at the same time took Hugh by the arm. Immediately the floor of the cabinet descended rapidly, and by the time Hugh had recovered from the shock, had stopped at a *grille*, which was immediately opened by a uniformed attendant, and, stepping out, Hugh Valentroyd was confronted by a most remarkable scene.

Through curtains which parted at his approach, he passed into a room, gorgeously-furnished and softly lit with shaded lamps. Roulette-tables were placed here and there, and were well patronised. There were also players at puck-a-pu, faro, felusi and fantan, these latter mostly Chinese. There were all nationalities represented, Englishmen, Germans and Americans, but, seated on a couch, nibbling chocolates and reading a book, Hugh's amazed eyes beheld the girl in the blue hat.

If he had expected to see a timid, frightened girl in the dread toils of some persecuting and evil villains, then Hugh Valentroyd was profoundly mistaken, for the girl before him was quite at her ease. Quickly he stepped over to her, quite forgetting Whining Willie, and, indeed, everything else but the girl. As he stood in front of her, she gave a little start, and before she spoke to him she cast a rather frightened look round the room. Apparently somewhat reassured, she addressed him.

"Whatever are you doing in this place?"

"I came to see you," replied Hugh, smiling, and, at her gesture of invitation, seating himself on the couch beside her.

"How did you find me—how did you find your way here?"

"Well, that is rather a long story," replied Valentroyd, "and I don't know whether I would be doing right in betraying the chap's confidence—even to you."

"My heavens! You haven't got another Secret Service man here, have you? I sincerely hope you haven't, for his sake."

The girl was now palpably frightened; her large violet eyes were wide with fear. Hugh hastened to put her mind at rest on that point. "No, no! As a matter of fact, he is only a very humble friend of mine, but a valuable one, since he has led me to you; he is a match-seller by profession," and he smiled whimsically.

Instantly the girl said, "Surely you don't mean to say that Whining Willie led you here?"

"How do you come to associate Whining Willie with my movements," Hugh countered, but the girl impatiently exclaimed:

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't let us lose time by this fencing about—I know—we all know about your adopting poor old Whining Willie, but nobody dreamt he would do a thing like this."

After a slight pause, she added:

"I always knew that man had courage."

Hugh Valentroyd, burning to unravel the mystery of this beautiful girl's life, could wait no longer. Bluntly he burst out, "Oh, my dear girl, it's quite clear that some mystery surrounds your life. I want to help you. Tell me about it."

"Stop," said Blue Hat. "You must whisper—not shout. In any case, you mustn't talk to me like this. I'm quite well able to look after myself. Indeed, I only wish I felt the same about you."

This remark, ending, as it did, on an almost pathetically wistful note, showed Hugh clearly that whereas, through fear of danger to herself or more probably to him, she might pretend to be very independent and quite at home in her strange surroundings, yet, underneath, she had a definite regard for him. There was an unmistakably affectionate look in her eloquent violet eyes, as she spoke these last words.

Hugh was reminded about the pearl. Taking it from his pocket, in the tiny box, he said, "You sent me this pearl, didn't you?"

"Sh—put it away at once." The girl was showing terror, and she quickly put out her hand with an imperative little gesture towards his coat-pocket.

"But why?" asked Valentroyd. "I wanted you to explain it."

"There is, surely, nothing to explain, is there?" the girl, in turn, asked him. "You are continually helping lame dogs over difficult stiles. I admire your good-

hearted, generous single-mindedness, particularly as I live among people who are anything but generous and single-minded." She smiled rather bitterly, then ended, "I simply sent a little donation to the 'lame dog' fund."

Hugh was puzzled.

"But," he said, "Whining Willie said that if I as much as touched the claws of the setting, I would die."

"What setting?" she asked.

"Why, the claw setting of the pin."

As he spoke, Valentroyd could see the innocent look in the beautiful eyes slowly change to one of horror. The girl's cheeks paled as she asked, "Have you touched the setting?" Then, as he shook his head, relief was manifest in her face, and she asked her next question, "Is it just as you got it? Pass it quickly into this chocolate-box."

She proffered him the box of chocolates, and as he took one, he dropped the tiny box amongst the sweets. With a preliminary glance round, Blue Hat opened the box containing the pearl inside her chocolate-box, and, as she beheld the mounted jewel, involuntarily withdrew her hand, as if from a viper. Then seeing the tiny note, she picked it up and examined it closely, laying it on her open book to hide it from anyone who might happen to be looking. Her lips were tight set and her face pale as she turned to Hugh, and said:

"When I wrote this note to you, it read, 'Whatever expenses you incur in your knight-errantry, let this pearl defray them,' and ended there. This second sentence, 'Whatever means you pursue to solve the mystery of your friend's death will only bring you disaster,' has been deliberately forged and added. If you look closely, you will see that, although it is an excellent

forgery, there are differences—look at the ‘P’s’ for instance, mine are quite differently formed.”

Astonished at her statement, and realising the significance of it, Hugh took the little note, and, upon close examination, quite concurred with what the girl said. There were definite differences, which had not been apparent to him before the question of two distinct messages had arisen. The joy that this disclosure of her innocence gave him was tempered by the confirmation of the danger in which this sweet girl must essentially be. Her correspondence was evidently tampered with, and her gifts of friendliness and kindness turned into grisly instruments of death.

“Dear Blue Hat,” he began, but she interrupted him with a little laugh.

“My name is Sylvia Peyton,” she said.

“Never mind,” Hugh returned. “I shall always think of you as Blue Hat, so I might as well call you Blue Hat—though I’ll try not. You must allow me to help you. Listen to me. I’ve only known you for a few minutes really, but that doesn’t matter. I know that you are the only girl who will ever mean anything to me, and I simply cannot bear to leave you in this dangerous——”

Again she interrupted him.

“Never! never! never talk to me like that again, Hugh Valentroyd.” Her little hands were clenched and her eyes flashed as she quickly and almost vehemently continued: “You know nothing about me, and you never can. As for the sentimental talk of being the only girl—pooh—forget it—and forget me. You must never try to see me again.”

Then more quietly and somewhat inconsistently, she

finished: "Oh, why should you want to unsettle me like this?"

Again there were plainly two conflicting issues. Her head directed her to reply as she did; her heart was prompting an entirely different course. Now, apparently, she noticed someone at the farthest end of the room from where they sat, and quickly turning to Hugh, she said:

"You must go now—don't stay any more. Now, obey me, won't you, in what I am going to tell you to do? Will you?"

Waiting for his affirming nod, she continued:

"Take this little lotus flower, pin it in your lapel now, and until midnight to-night wear it in the lapel of any coat you may wear; I mean the outside coat."

Pinning the tiny flower in his coat, Hugh was about to say something more when he felt a touch on his elbow. It was Whining Willie.

"Come on, guv'nor," he said. "Somefing's up—we'd better get."

Just as he was turning to go, after bidding Sylvia Peyton good-bye, she said quickly:

"By the way, do you like Eunice de Laine?"

Astonished by this curious question, so very foreign to their preceding conversation, Hugh hesitated for a second. He had, as a matter of fact, completely forgotten the existence of the charming dark-haired girl who had introduced him to the Brick-Bat Club.

"Yes, I think she's a very nice girl," he replied, then as he thought he traced a shadow of annoyance across the pretty face before him, he added quickly: "But not as I like you."

"Sh—go, go, go." Furiously the little head was shaken, but as he turned away, Hugh smiled because

he thought he saw a little brightening of the violet eyes and a little look of satisfaction put to flight the shadow of annoyance.

Accompanied by Whining Willie, Hugh Valentroyd made his way between the gaming-tables to the left. As he passed, he noticed the play was pretty high, for piles of notes and silver were banked up on every table, and no one was playing without actual cash.

Without incident they entered the lift, passed out through the dummy telephone-box on the ground-floor, and stood again at the end of Chock Lu's tea-shop. The contrast between the quiet, cultured luxury of the casino downstairs, and the loathsome sordidness of this sink of iniquity was marked. Hugh paused a second for, seated in a large chair just inside the beaded curtain that shut off the main café from the "telephone-box," was an old, old Chinaman. He was having his head shaved, his wrinkled face washed in perfumed oils, and his ears syringed. His skinny arms were covered with gold and jewelled ornaments, for, following the custom of many of his compatriots, he carried his wealth thus on his person when in London.

Noticing Hugh gazing at the Chinaman, Whining Willie said:

"Come on, guv'nor, it's only an old Chink getting over an opium binge."

Hugh could smell no opium, but the beaded curtains, the tables, the chair-backs and everything he touched on his progress through the café had a chalky touch—sure sign of the presence of opium. A pretty, dark-eyed girl, straight in figure as a boy—she could not have been more than sixteen—attracted Hugh's attention by her loud laughter at some joke the wizened

Chinaman had evidently told her. Hugh hurried out into the fresh air in the wake of Whining Willie.

Even the air of Poplar back streets, tainted by many an unclean odour, was much to be preferred to that den from which he had just issued.

As they made their way along the narrow streets to get back to the car route, Hugh Valentroyd preserved silence. He was thinking over the remarkable experience of the day. Turning to Whining Willie, he said:

"What is the real history of that place? Has it any connection with the Brick-Bat Club?"

"Well," replied his companion, "it has and it hasn't. The same great chief, the President, is the real boss, but you never see him there. The Hawk has nothing to do with that, though."

"Who is the President? You have never mentioned him before?" Hugh asked.

"Nobody knows who he is—'cept 'e's the President," replied Whining Willie. "Ah, oh dear! oh dear! oh——"

With astonishment Hugh saw his companion fall, emitting exactly the same type of expression of pain and shock that Raymond Gaunt had made in his dying seconds. Sounds that Hugh was unlikely ever to forget. He knelt beside Whining Willie, but he somehow knew, before he examined him, that he would be dead. He was.

A crowd collected, and a policeman soon appeared, cleared a space, and made a short examination:

"Anybody know him?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Hugh, "he was with me when he suddenly collapsed."

"Name and address." Laconically the officer spoke, and Hugh recollected that the absence of the customary

respect he received from members of the force was a tribute to his excellent disguise. He repressed a smile as he gave the required information.

The doctor had now arrived, and pronounced Whining Willie dead. The policeman ordered Hugh to wait by the body while he telephoned to the local police-station for the ambulance. While he waited there, a tall, dirty, unshaven, cadaverous-looking man with an aquiline nose and close-set, shifty black eyes, pushed the women with babies in their arms and others roughly to one side and, edging his way up to Hugh Valentroyd, whispered hoarsely in his ear:

"If I were you, guv'nor, I'd beat it—quick—sher up." As Hugh was about to speak, the unprepossessing one lifted a menacing elbow, then continued: "Any case, if yer goin' ter stick it—yer got to tell the 'D's' nothing 'bout where you've been—nothin' 'bout nothin', see? Or else the girl'll go the same way as poor old Whining Willie. Look out, here's the doings."

Hugh looked up and saw the policeman had returned with an ambulance and a plain-clothes officer with him. While Whining Willie's body was being placed in the ambulance, the detective came to Hugh.

"Your name? What? Hugh Valentroyd?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Hugh.

"What address?"

"16, Curzon Square."

"What—you mean to say you work there, caretaker there, or what?" asked the detective, eyeing his disreputable appearance suspiciously.

"No, no!" impatiently replied Hugh. "I live there. I am shabbily-dressed because I accompanied the poor

chap who's dead to see various aspects of life down here, without being conspicuous."

"I see," said the officer. "Well, I s'pose you've got some servant or other who could identify you?" he half smiled, but he was in grave doubt, when Hugh replied at once:

"Certainly, I will wait at your police-station while you send for my butler."

He accompanied the detective to the police-station, and in about half-an-hour James arrived, very perturbed at having to come down to a police-station for any purpose whatever. The identification being disposed of satisfactorily, the attitude of the police officials changed tremendously. With profuse apologies and many explanations of what they had to do in the course of "duty," they escorted him to his car which had brought James down. James, dying to unburden himself, and privileged beyond limit, followed him into the car. He lost no time in addressing his master.

"Sir," he began, "if I may be permitted to say so, I have seen this coming hoff, sir—this and worse, ever since you brought that unfortunate scarecrow into your establishment, sir. Indeed, sir, I may say I am relieved that it is not worse, sir——" But Hugh had had enough. Tapping the glass, he stopped the car, then, turning to James, he said:

"James, take this rug, wrap yourself up well, and sit outside—mind you don't get cold."

"Sir," began James, crestfallen and disappointed, but beginning to move.

"Get on! Get on!" said Hugh sharply, and the old man knew that another treat had been stopped.

The next morning after breakfast James entered with two cards on a tray. He dared not comment, but

volumes of disapproval clouded his face as Hugh Valentroyd read:

"Chief Inspector Overtley, C.I.D. Scotland Yard," and "Inspector Burnyeatte, C.I.D. Scotland Yard."

"Show them in," said Hugh.

"We have come, Mr. Valentroyd," began the Chief Inspector, "to inquire into the circumstances under which you visited the Brick-Bat Club on the 20th of last month, and your movements, please, yesterday afternoon. We are not here to make any charge against you—yet, it is necessary to warn you that what you now say may be used against you in evidence."

CHAPTER FIVE

A DUEL OF WITS

HUGH VALENTROYD was quite unprepared for the bluntness of the inspector's opening words. They amounted almost to a threat. But, he felt, the whole thing was farcical. What connection had he with the tragedy of the Brick-Bat Club when Raymond Gaunt died so suddenly and so mysteriously? What possible responsibility could attach to him because Whining Willie had met a similar fate in the street when accompanying him? His hesitation was only a matter of seconds, during which both the police officers watched him keenly; then he replied:

"I am quite at a loss to know the meaning of your remarks, Inspector Overtley, or the necessity for the caution you think fit to give me. If any proceedings to my prejudice are likely to arise, I think I had better get a lawyer here, don't you?"

"The caution is a formal one and must be given in a case like this," replied the inspector. "I have no objection to your lawyer being present, but it is surely not necessary for a lawyer to assist you to give an answer to my plain questions?"

Hugh thought he detected a sneer in the words, and, quick to resent the impertinence, he replied hotly:

"Look here, Inspector Overtley, I am perfectly prepared to assist you to the limit of my capacity, but I

will not tolerate any impertinence on your part. I am not without connections that would be valuable in case of improper conduct on the part of the police."

"I intended no offence, sir," replied the Inspector more politely, "I am simply asking you for particulars of your movements on two occasions."

"And implying at the same time that I require no lawyer to help me to give them," caustically returned Hugh. "No, no, let me finish," as the inspector was about to interrupt, "I will answer you briefly. On the 20th of last month I went with a lady friend of mine to the Brick-Bat Club. Then I met my friend Raymond Gaunt accidentally, and as I spoke to him, he died, and I gave this evidence at the Coroner's Court. I have nothing more to add now. As regards my movements yesterday, I have already explained these sufficiently, in my judgment, to the Poplar police. I will repeat my statement to you.

"I went down to Poplar with a consumptive match-seller, whom I adopted because I found him collapsed in the street, and I knew him by the only name he ever gave me—'Whining Willie.' I went down because he had told me something of the various aspects of life there, and I wanted to see the district with my own eyes. To the end that we could pass here and there without attracting undue attention, we wore old, shabby clothes. As we were returning, he suddenly dropped in the street with a cry of pain, and when I examined him, he was dead. I gave these facts to the local police. I will repeat them to the Coroner, before whom I am instructed I must appear."

"Quite so, sir, quite so," said the Inspector. "Now, where exactly did you visit yesterday in Poplar?"

"Oh," Hugh replied, "we walked through the streets

and went into a lot of cafés, Chinese ones mostly—that's all."

"Did you go to any specially peculiar club?"

"Not that I'm aware of," replied Hugh, "every place we entered might have been a club for all I know to the contrary."

"Now, be very careful, sir—did you go to a club like the Brick-Bat Club where rich people were gathered?"

Hugh hesitated just a second, then replied:

"A club like the Brick-Bat Club in Poplar—good heavens, no. I tell you I was dressed in positive rags."

"Did you see in any of the places you visited, any people you had seen in the Brick-Bat Club?" the Inspector pressed.

"No," replied Hugh, determined at any cost to keep Sylvia Peyton out of the conversation.

"Why did you go on this strange journey, Mr. Valentroyd?"

"Oh! I've told you," replied Hugh, "because poor old Whining Willie had interested me about the place."

"Now, try to remember, was he telling you anything special when he collapsed?" the Inspector asked.

"No," replied Hugh, "I think he was merely commenting on the sort of places we had visited—nothing important certainly."

"Could you give me a list of every call you made, Mr. Valentroyd?"

"Bless my soul! no," replied Hugh. "How can you think it? The place was as foreign as China to me. I was merely shown round by Whining Willie. I couldn't find my way alone for a king's ransom."

"You must have noticed—you must have been impressed deeply with the fact that Raymond Gaunt and

the match-seller both died mysteriously in your presence, Mr. Valentroyd," said Inspector Overtley.

"Quite true, it is a most impressive coincidence," said Hugh.

"And you will agree that the coincidence is further developed when it is clear that there is a definite connection between the two things. Gaunt dies mysteriously in your presence in the Brick-Bat Club. You suddenly pick up a match-seller whose stand was at the door of that club, and he dies in your presence. Two subsidiary facts are that members of the Brick-Bat Club nearly always spoke to Whining Willie, and you simply haunted the entrance for several days before the match-seller's faint. Now, come, Mr. Valentroyd, these coincidences are irresistible, and I call on you as a gentleman to assist the law by telling us all you know."

"I have already done that," said Hugh doggedly, "after all, it is merely coincidence—there is no point of contact between the two deaths, really."

"I beg to differ from you," said the Inspector, "there *is* a point of contact. How long have you known Sylvia Peyton?"

Sharply did the inspector ask his question, and Hugh, startled at the sudden change in the method of attack, and also fearful of injuring Sylvia, stammered:

"Oh, not long—why?"

"How did you get to know her?" snapped the Inspector.

"Introduced by someone—I forget whom," replied Hugh.

"When did you see her last?" pursued his tormentor.

"I can't quite remember—some time ago." Hugh was thinking rapidly. They couldn't possibly know he

saw her at Chock Lu's yesterday—anyway he would consistently deny that.

“Did you see her yesterday in Poplar?”

Heavens, was there to be no end to this man's questions? This was the final challenge, and the answer must be the lie direct.

“In Poplar—Sylvia Peyton—yesterday? Certainly not, how could I?”

Hugh Valentroyd was not a liar, and he hated the necessity, but he told himself it *was* a necessity, and thanked his stars he was able with a straight face to stare the inspector full in the eyes as he gave his answer.

“You would swear that?”

“Of course.”

It was now a match between two strong personalities. The inspector gazed into the clear eyes of Hugh Valentroyd as if to pierce the secrets of his inmost soul. Quite as unflinchingly did Hugh return his glance. One was a strong man fighting, armed with a vast store of experience of men and events, for the vindication of the law. The other was a strong man, too, fighting with the strength that nature endows the male animal with, in time of crisis, for the defence of his menaced mate. The battle was drawn. Motioning to his assistant, the Chief Inspector said:

“I feel you could tell us more, Mr. Valentroyd. I would rather we fought side by side in this matter than on opposite sides. My side is naturally yours. Be very careful, sir, how you allow yourself to be embroiled in what I can tell you promises to be a very ugly business.”

“Thank you, inspector,” replied Hugh. “I am sorry

you should think I am not anxious to assist you. I will, of course, help you all I can."

"I shall see you again, sir—au revoir." The inspector bowed, and accompanied by his assistant, who also bowed deferentially to Hugh, left the room. Hugh went with them to the hall where James showed them out, then he returned, mixed himself a stiff whisky and soda, and drank it at a single gulp.

"Where on earth am I being landed?" he asked himself. He visualised all manner of possible dangers ahead, but, clear in bold relief above them all, he saw a pretty figure, light-brown hair and violet eyes surmounted by a blue hat, and he said to himself as he rose to go out:

"It's worth while anyway. It's worth while."

Towards evening Hugh received his summons to attend the inquest, and the following day he did so. No new facts emerged from the inquiry. He was pressed by counsel representing the police, but his story remained substantially the same as he had already told it to the officials at Poplar.

Hugh noticed that Chief Inspector Overtley was present, and when counsel for the police asked for an adjournment on the grounds that the authorities attached great importance to inquiries that were not yet complete, he glanced at the inspector who, he found, was narrowly watching him.

The inquest stood adjourned, and for several days nothing happened, but each day added to Hugh's great longing to see Sylvia Peyton again. Each morning he expected some letter from her, but nothing came, and for several days he stayed indoors during the afternoon, hoping that some message might come from her, but none came. So the days wore on, and at last the

adjourned inquest was held. Again the police had nothing new to add, and the coroner had an open verdict of "Death from Shock" returned.

As Hugh left the court and drove through the main streets of Poplar on his way home, his mind was carried back to that afternoon when he had come down with Whining Willie and had seen Sylvia. He wondered if she knew that the match-seller had been murdered like that almost as soon as he left the club.

For the thousandth time he went over in his mind the incident of the tiny lotus flower, which she had given him to wear until midnight of the day of poor Whining Willie's death, and he could not resist the conviction that the innocent-looking flower had been a talisman of safety to him. Then had this girl with the beautifully large, innocent, violet eyes subscribed to a horrible murder of a poor, consumptive match-seller? Had she sat there on the rich divan in the luxurious chambers below Chock Lu's den, calmly eating chocolates, yet knowing that poor Whining Willie was under some terrible sentence of death? The thought was intolerable. Hugh Valentroyd determined to find Sylvia again. Yes, he would start at once.

Speaking to the chauffeur, he altered his destination to the Brick-Bat Club, left his car, which he ordered to go home, and boldly entered. Crossing the hall he left his hat and coat in the cloak-room and made as if to enter the main downstairs room in which he had sat with Eunice de Laine on the night Raymond Gaunt died.

At the door, however, he was confronted by a tall commissionaire who might have been an Irish-Italian by his accent.

"What do you think will win the National, sir?" he asked.

"I really can't say," replied Hugh surprised.

In a second the man became suspicious.

"Pardon, sir—are you a member here?"

"No," replied Hugh, "but I am here to meet someone."

"You can't enter without a member, sir," returned the doorkeeper.

Hugh produced a note, but the man still stolidly shook his head.

"No, sir, you cannot enter without a member."

Hugh played a bold card.

"When I tell the Hawk you stopped me coming to see him, you'll wish you had been more reasonable. I'll guarantee that," he said.

Fear, unmistakable and great, was marked clearly on the man's face as he signed to an assistant, whispered something to him, and said to Hugh:

"This man will conduct you, sir."

Hugh walked across the room in the wake of the assistant doorkeeper who went straight to the door through which Hugh had seen Sylvia Peyton enter on that tragic night.

Arriving there, the servant did nothing—simply stood aside, looking curiously at Hugh, and waiting for him to move.

Hugh took the handle of the door and attempted to turn it, but the door was locked. He knocked boldly on the panels, and in a second the door flew open, and Hugh found himself confronting the large, unpleasant-looking fellow of the prize-fighting type who had roughly conducted Sylvia back through that same door on that fatal occasion.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I want to speak to the Hawk." Boldly Hugh rapped the words out. A deep, metallic voice from inside the room intervened:

"Bring him in." The big man, who had been about to reply, obediently stood to one side, and Hugh entered.

The room was large and a fire burnt brightly on a big open hearth. Pictures of race-horses, prize-fighters, actresses and greyhounds filled the walls. A large, square mahogany desk occupied the centre of the floor, and several armchairs and smaller chairs stood near the desk, as if a number of people had recently been in conference. But by far the most remarkable sight in the room was the man who occupied the armchair at the far side of the desk, with his back to the light.

Instantly Hugh knew that this was the Hawk, no name could be more appropriate. Indeed, as he sat looking at Hugh, the latter was forcibly reminded of pictures he had seen of the Egyptian Hawk deity. The brow of the man who sat before him was high, the hair thin and grey. The nose was long, thin and curved—like a hawk's beak, but his eyes were, perhaps, the most remarkable feature in a collection of remarkable features. Small, beady, black and intensely bright, they were never still, but seemed for ever resting on the object of their gaze, leaving it for a second, then returning. They were close-set and wicked, those little, beady black eyes of the Hawk. His mouth was thin-lipped, his chin firm and strong. A bad knife-gash marked one side of his face from the temple to the chin, and on the same side some slight nervous affection caused the muscles to keep twitching, and when

they twitched, they gave a more menacing look than ever to a thoroughly evil countenance.

"Well, what do you want?" The Hawk spoke quietly—his tones deep, but with a metallic ring that was unpleasant—almost brutal.

"I have come to try to find Miss Sylvia Peyton," replied Hugh.

"You have, have you?" A slight pause during which the Hawk's eyes danced from Hugh to other parts of the room and back again, then he said:

"Any tail on him?"

The cryptic words were addressed to someone else, for the Hawk looked right past Hugh, who turned slightly and saw that two thugs of the prize-fighting order were standing behind him. Apparently they had arrived in response to some secret signal of the Hawk's that Hugh had not noticed. One was the man who had met him at the room door and the other was of a similar type.

"No, sir," answered the former.

"Show him downstairs."

No sooner had the words left the Hawk's lips than both the thugs gripped Hugh, who struggled desperately but fruitlessly. They rushed him towards a cupboard door, which, when opened, disclosed a flight of steps, narrow and steep. Unceremoniously was Hugh pushed down this flight, assisted by a kick.

Shaken and bruised, he began to pick himself up in the darkness at the bottom, when his captors were on him again. Through a series of cellars they led him, and finally stopped at a locked door which one of them opened, disclosing another door with felt and baize material covering whatever it was made of. This opened, Hugh was pushed into a room lit by two elec-

tric lights, and the door was closed behind him. The walls were of some sort of felt or cloth material, the floor soft. A bare table stood in the centre, a large couch with some rugs folded on it and two chairs. The room was warm and the air was not bad, but there was no window—it was invisibly ventilated and warmed.

After Hugh had looked round a few times, he began to shout, but even as he shouted, he sensed a curious sort of deadness about the sound in this room, as if his voice came back to him in some curious way, it did not seem to penetrate the walls. Presently a voice, quite near apparently, but unseen, called out to him, in mechanical tones, as if a megaphone or a loud-speaker was being used.

“Shout just as much as you like, but only if it relieves your feelings. You can’t be heard. I thought I’d just give you the tip to save your voice.”

“Who are you?” called Hugh, glad to hear a voice of any kind, but no further sound did he hear—just the echoes of his own words coming back to him again.

Hugh kept looking at his watch, and the minutes seemed to drag like hours, but nothing happened. Fully three hours went by when he heard a muffled sound like the turning of locks a long way off. Then the doors were opened and the two thugs appeared, accompanied by a waiter who carried a tray. The two former stood between Hugh and the open door while the waiter laid the table. Valentroyd knew it would be hopeless to attempt to rush, and he also knew that if he attempted to shout through the open door, the thugs would quickly silence him. The waiter finished and they were withdrawing. Hugh spoke for the first time. He addressed the big, ugly, prize-fighting man who had become so familiar to him by sight.

"I say, can't you tell me what this game is?" he asked.

"Can't say nothing," the man replied. Then, just as he was going through the door, he said:

"Got any smokes, guv'nor?"

Hugh replied that he had not, whereupon the big man put his hand in his pocket and handed Hugh a packet of twenty cigarettes and a box of matches, then he withdrew.

On the table was a bottle of Chianti, a cold chicken, salad, an apple pie, some bread and cheese and half a bottle of brandy.

"Hum," said Hugh, "they don't mean me to starve, anyhow. Plain but good—let's see what happens next."

But three days were to pass before anything happened further. Three times a day did the little procession arrive with good, plain food, newspapers and cigarettes, but no sign of the Hawk appeared, or any prospect of liberty.

Then suddenly the door opened at an unusual time on the third evening, and the larger of the two thugs came in, bringing *Hugh's own suit-case*.

"'Ere's yer clothes and shaving tackle and everything, guv'nor. Get titivated up quick. Yer going to appear before the President."

CHAPTER SIX

THE PRESIDENT

HUGH VALENTROYD was delighted to think that at least some movement was about to take place. The solitary confinement of the last three days had told on him, and the reference to the President, who had been mentioned to him by the match-seller just before he died, excited his curiosity.

"Who is the President?" he asked.

"I can't tell you that, guv'nor," replied the thug who had acted as his warder, "but he's an important buck, and you oughta dress yourself up for him."

The heavy-weight warder went over to the door, then came back again and whispered hoarsely to Hugh:

"I 'ope you get on all right, guv'nor—straight I do. I 'eard a lot about your kindness to blokes that need a 'elping hand and I 'eard 'ow yer looked after poor old Whining Willie, and I wouldn't like 'arm to come to yer. Dress yerself up proper, and act diplomatic like when you come before the President, and good luck, guv'nor." The man then withdrew and Hugh was left alone again. He opened his suit-case, and there found a complete change of clothing, a new suit, razor, and everything he could need. How had they got there?

He wondered how it was that James had not instituted some inquiries on his behalf, and, indeed, had

expected to read of himself as missing in every paper he had perused, but he found nothing.

Speedily he changed, and after the shave—the first since his captivity—and a complete change of under-clothing, he felt much fresher and better. He had scarcely completed his toilet when the door opened and the good-natured gaoler appeared again, accompanied by his assistant, and this time they both wore overcoats.

“Put yer top-coat on, guv’nor—we’re going motor-ing,” he said, and Hugh promptly obeyed.

When he had slipped on his overcoat, he followed the gaoler down the passage, through the cellars and along another passage that he had not before traversed, until they reached a closed door. Here the big man stopped.

“Now, guv’nor,” he said, “we are going in a motor-car, and I don’t want to annoy you by fostering you up. You know what happened to the Secret Service man, Gaunt, and you know what happened to the pore old match-lad—well—enough said, isn’t it? Yer don’t want me to use threats unnecessary-like, do you?”

“I understand,” replied Hugh. “You are asking me if I will preserve silence in return for your consideration—I agree.”

“That’s the stuff, guv’nor,” returned the other, opening the door.

Outside, in what seemed a back street, a large closed car was waiting, and the assistant to the big thug stepped forward and opened the door. The big man beckoned Hugh to step forward, and they set off. Facing the driver sat Hugh and the big thug, and opposite sat the assistant. As the car threaded its way through the traffic of the streets, no one spoke a word. Pres-

ently, by the accelerated speed of the car, Hugh judged they were leaving the town behind and were in the open country. He remarked to his companion :

“We are travelling faster now,” and his companion replied :

“Yes, faster now.”

The blinds being drawn, Hugh could not tell in which direction the car was travelling, and as his companion evidently meant to preserve silence, he did not make any attempt at conversation. This silence was only broken by the big man offering cigarettes to Hugh and his assistant, an offer which in both cases was accepted, and for the rest of the journey which, Hugh judged, lasted about two hours, all smoked silently.

At last the car slowed up and took a right-angle turn, entering some road, the surface of which was gravel, and Hugh surmised this was the drive of some large house.

Very shortly afterwards the car stopped, and the assistant stepped out. Hugh followed, and the big man brought up the rear. They had stopped at the portico of what was, apparently, a large country house, for lights were showing in a number of windows.

Climbing several steps, they arrived at a massive door, and the assistant rang a bell which clanged noisily in the distance. The door was almost immediately opened, and they then passed out into a large hall furnished as a lounge, in which two log fires burned warmly. Two liveried footmen confronted the trio, and to one of them the big man handed a paper, making no comment at all. The footman merely said :

“Step this way,” and led the way up the main staircase to the first-floor, along a corridor, and into a small room, simply furnished with four easy-chairs,

two small chairs, and a table. It was a typical waiting-room, and here Hugh and his escort were left.

Silently they seated themselves. Hugh, at any rate, was feeling the tension, but as neither of his companions spoke, he also refrained from doing so. Within three minutes of his departure, the footman returned. Ignoring the two thugs, he addressed himself solely to Hugh, and in a tone of marked respect:

"There is half-an-hour to wait, sir," he said. "I am directed to ask if you will take any refreshment, sir."

"Thank you," Hugh replied, "a little brandy, perhaps."

Silently the footman bowed, and withdrew. Hugh wondered if the brandy might be poisoned but instantly discarded such a notion as they had already had ample chance to harm him if they had so desired, and so when the footman returned with a decanter and glass, accompanied by a soda syphon and water carafe, he thanked him and immediately helped himself. The brandy was excellent, and he had scarcely tasted it when the footman was back again with a plate of appetising sandwiches. Whoever lived here, and he judged it was the President's house, must be a man of wealth and culture and consideration. Half-an-hour passed and the footman returned.

He again addressed Hugh, ignoring the thugs. "Step this way please, sir," he said. Hugh followed him, and, in his wake, followed his escort. Again the long, first-floor corridor was traversed, but not the staircase this time, for the footman halted before two folding doors. He waited until Hugh and his escort were standing before them; then he knocked softly, and one of the doors opened slightly. Someone inside appar-

ently asked the footman a question and received a satisfactory reply, for he had scarcely made his whispered remarks when both the doors were thrown open and Hugh was ushered into a large room. It was well, but softly lit; the lights invisible. All round the room, bookcases, containing books bound in calf, lined the walls. A painted ceiling, brightly illuminated, pointed to the manner in which the room was lit. In the centre of the room stood a large table, sitting around which were men and women, some in evening-dress, others in morning-attire. A mixed crowd; some obviously opulent in a restrained manner; others belligerently rich, racy and loud.

To his astonishment, Hugh Valentroyd recognised Sylvia Peyton sitting half-way down the room, and next to her was the dark, smiling Eunice de Laine. Sylvia gave him a friendly smile, but very discreetly, with a timorous glance round the table. Eunice smiled openly, nodded cheerily—almost jauntily—and quite fearlessly.

By some curious instinct, Hugh seemed to know at once that he had two friends there at least.

Great was the contrast between the fair Sylvia, with her petty, shrinking ways, and the tall and bold Eunice, with her modern frankness and obvious fearlessness. Nevertheless, he felt they were both friends of his. He knew, now that he saw them together, that Eunice, though jolly, good-hearted, pretty—and he believed loyal—simply meant nothing to him, but sweet little Sylvia, ah, how completely she filled his whole life.

He looked away from her in response to a cultured and beautifully-modulated voice from the end of the table, saying in conversational, almost friendly tones:

"You are Hugh Probyn Valentroyd?"

For the first time Hugh gazed down the room and saw that at the end of the long table was another one beyond it. This was placed across the room and stood on a raised dais, like a judge's bench. On the far side of this bench, or table, were three large, throne-like chairs, the centre one having a very high and much carved back. In this chair was seated the personage who had addressed him.

Hugh could not properly see his face, because he wore a mask, but his hair was plentiful and grey. Over full evening-dress he wore a purple robe, and he had a number of decorations on a coat revealed by the open robe, whilst the sash of some order crossed his shirt-front. Round his neck he wore a heavy chain. He leaned his head lightly on his right hand, his elbow resting on the arm of the great chair.

At his right hand sat an elderly man, typically American. This man wore no mask, and shrewd eyes shone through his horn-rimmed spectacles. He, also, wore a purple robe, but no decorations.

To the left of the central figure was a tall Hindu, who also was unmasked and wore a purple robe. Across his ample breast he carried an exalted order.

In silence the whole room waited for Hugh's reply.

"Yes, I am Hugh Probyn Valentroyd," he admitted tersely.

The central figure bowed, and glanced towards the table, where, just before him, on the opposite side to Sylvia and Eunice, sat the Hawk. The latter, who was wearing a dinner-jacket and looked more Machiavellian than ever in conventional dress, now rose, glanced towards Hugh, bowed awkwardly, and commenced to address the "Bench."

"Mr. President," he began, "I have brought the man who stands before you, in accordance with the rule you enforce, to obtain your sanction to dispose of him in the usual way. I shall, with your permission, read to you the case which our member, Marks, has prepared for me against him."

Here the Hawk turned slightly to indicate a little, old, white-headed ex-solicitor who sat beside him, and handed him paper after paper as his speech proceeded.

"This man, Valentroyd, was found in the vicinity of the Brick-Bat Club for about a week prior to the collapse of one of our members—Whining Willie. He witnessed the collapse of Whining Willie. Indeed, I am informed he saved him from being run over as he fell in the street. Then he took Whining Willie home to his house in Curzon Square and had him looked after until he recovered. Now there is another member of your club whom this man knows, and she is here. I refer to Miss Sylvia Peyton." Here the Hawk darted a malevolent look across to Sylvia, and all eyes followed his and centered on the girl.

"She sent him a pearl to pay for some charity work or other," the Hawk continued, "and here I have to admit I was a little premature, and perhaps out of order, but I thought there was a danger that I since understand did not then exist. I had the pearl mounted in one of our—er—usual settings." A gasp of horror went up at this revelation and the President leaned forward; the American frowned, the Hindu remained unperturbed.

"Now this man, Valentroyd, had a friend called Raymond Gaunt—he was present when Gaunt died, following the sentence of this court. He was present when

Whining Willie died, following the emergency regulation for a traitor——”

The President interrupted:

“What was the emergency under which Whining Willie was executed?”

“He had brought this man, Mr. President, down to Chock Lu’s and taken him downstairs.”

The President bowed, and the Hawk proceeded.

“I am informed that when Whining Willie took this man to Poplar, he had a long interview with Miss Peyton, who gave him the lotus flower, thus putting him outside the emergency order for summary execution, but I reported the whole facts to you, Mr. President, and, you will have the goodness to remember I asked for process against Miss Peyton, and I propose to state a case when I have finished with Hugh Valentroyd.”

The Hawk seemed a little embarrassed now he had come to the end of his notes. He had had no replies from the President or his coadjutors. He turned for a second to the little ex-solicitor who prompted him, then he continued:

“In summary, the case is this, Mr. President. This man made Whining Willie a traitor. Mr. Valentroyd’s friend was a police spy, and, finally, he actually came to the club, unaccompanied, and came to me, in my room. I seized him—and I suggest that he is a menace to this society as long as he lives.”

The Hawk sat down, and the President’s voice immediately put an end to the slight buzz of conversation that had begun as soon as the Hawk had finished.

“Before I call on Hugh Probyn Valentroyd, is there anything else that I should hear?”

The soft, cultured tones were perfectly dispassion-

ate. The President might have been discussing the affairs of another planet.

Immediately, Sylvia Peyton rose, and everyone's gaze fastened on her. Hugh noticed that the little hands were clenched, the lips trembling, as she began in shaky tones:

"Mr. President, Hugh Valentroyd saved my life when I was attacked in Montmartre three years ago. He has rendered other services of a very great nature. When Robert Coulton got the necklace from the Duchess Della Franca it was only by Hugh Valentroyd covering them with his diplomatic passport that we got them across.

"These are services to the club, and on the strength of those services, I ask for your protection, Mr. President, both for Hugh Valentroyd, whose record is, after all, only one of service—not treachery—and myself."

Sylvia sat down. She had lied boldly, and immediately Eunice de Laine rose.

Looking fearlessly round the room, and fixing the Hawk with a half-humorous, half-mocking smile, she addressed the august Bench. Hugh could not help noticing that her manner was not exactly humble and sincerely respectful, as she did that, but there was an element of irrepressible humour—almost fun—in her manner and voice as she spoke.

"Mr. President, I corroborate all that Sylvia Peyton says, and I have to add the following facts. Hugh Valentroyd deliberately suppressed knowledge of the club to the coroner at Whining Willie's inquest. He gave no information about the message that our worthy Hawk thought fit to send him, by manipulating Sylvia's gift of a pearl. I don't pretend to be so great a person as the high-flying Hawk here." She bowed ironic-

ally to the Hawk, with a twinkle in her eye, but Hugh noticed that he did nothing—just looked before him. “But,” she continued, “in the more recent activities of the club, I think I am right in stating we will require the help and support of such persons who are acquainted with the diplomatic service, or, at any rate, of the class from which diplomatic servants are drawn.”

A murmur of applause passed gently through the room, and Eunice sat down, but no one spoke, and Hugh noticed the President was in close conference with the two people at his right and left hand. In a moment the little conference was over and the President began to speak.

“The order is that Hugh Probyn Valentroyd becomes a member of our Society, takes our oath, and thus escapes the only alternative which anyone possessing his knowledge of our affairs can be offered, and that is speedy death.”

“Hugh Valentroyd,” pronounced the President in loud, clear tones. “Do you wish to join the Brick-Bat Club and swear an oath of loyalty, or do you wish for an alternative?”

Hugh, who recognised what the alternative was, and whose heart leapt at the prospect of any closer association with Sylvia, instantly replied:

“I will join, and I will keep my oath.”

Again a murmur of applause was heard. The President bowed, and, accompanied by his two *confrères*, went through a door at the end of the room. The two thugs, who had stood on each side of Hugh Valentroyd, left. A tall, elderly man, with a bald head and large, plain features, got up from the table, approached Hugh, and said:

“Will you please accompany me?”

Hugh followed him from the room to a small cosily-furnished apartment off the landing of the second-floor. Standing in front of the fire was the President, still wearing his mask and purple gown. The tall, elderly man said to Hugh:

“Do you swear by all you hold sacred to obey to the death the decrees of the Executive of the Brick-Bat Club, blindly and unselfishly, through prosperity or persecution?”

“Yes,” replied Hugh. “I swear.”

“Good,” said the President, who removed his mask, “Now we can have a talk, Valentroyd.”

To his amazement Hugh found himself gazing upon the smiling features of Viscount Halmene, Peer of the Realm and one-time friend of his late father.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PRESIDENT'S POLICY

VISCOUNT HALMENE, or "The President" as he was evidently known to his *confrères*, attested the document which the tall, elderly man, who had administered the oath, placed before Hugh for signature. Sealing-wax having been dropped on a hanging seal, the President sealed it with his ring, waited a second for it to set, then handed it to the tall man.

He then laid aside his robes and chain, of which the tall man took charge, turned to Hugh again, and said:

"Come along now, Valentroyd, the hour is late, but I daresay we can both do with a little supper. I have arranged for us to have a snack alone, so that I may talk to you."

He led the way to the floor below, and presently ushered Hugh into a small room, simply furnished, in which a table was laid for two. The President then closed the door behind him, and said:

"Now, don't stand on any ceremony, Valentroyd; just help yourself from the sideboard. You will find several sorts of wines in the cellarette." Hugh needed no second invitation.

On the old-fashioned walnut sideboard were placed cold pheasants, a joint of beef, a ham, salads and fruits. Hugh helped himself to a half-pheasant and salad, then

took a bottle of Burgundy out of the cellarette. He noticed the wine was a vintage Volnay. The President helped himself to beef and a little wine.

"Indigestible—at this time of night simply murder, but I love it!" he said to Hugh, as he saw the latter glance at his plate.

"Now you are dying to know about it, aren't you?" he continued. "Well, the society you have joined has three cardinal points. Power, wealth and simplicity. Power, because we demand obedience of our members and insist upon it, and that demand is rarely challenged because death is the immediate penalty—but you have seen expressions of that power." The President took a drink, then went on: "Wealth follows power automatically. Simplicity? Well, there is an executive of three men only, and they are nominated by me. Their decisions are purely advisory. My fiat is final, and that fiat runs world-wide, so no clumsy machinery hampers quick movement. Is that clear?"

"Quite," replied Hugh, "but do I understand from your use of the word 'wealth' in connection with this club that it is a criminal organisation?"

"Exactly," blandly replied the President, "not exclusively so, but involving what you call criminal practices, certainly."

"I suppose it is no use my saying how unnecessary such practices are to me from a financial point of view," replied Hugh.

A shadow of annoyance crossed the President's face as he answered:

"I suppose it is unnecessary for me to tell you that you have just had an escape from certain death—the death which came to Raymond Gaunt and Whining Willie," he said sharply, "and no way remained for

you to live but to bind you by the oath you have taken. I may tell you——”

“Oh, I understand that,” interrupted Hugh, “and I’ll play the game all right, but you must realise, sir, that for one, who, like myself, hates and detests crime and criminals, it is a tall order to be suddenly made a criminal, without the least desire—the least necessity.”

The President smiled.

“The attitude of the average person towards anything unusual is one of stupidity. The attitude of the average well-placed conventional citizen like yourself towards what is loudly called ‘crime’ is one of fanatical bigotry, hopeless hypocrisy, and absolute inconsistency. Now you, yourself—from what companies do you derive your dividends?”

Hugh, after a slight pause, answered:

“Rubber companies, Tea, Coffee, Iron and Steel and Government Securities.”

“Exactly,” returned the President, “a nice lot—and a pretty little assortment of thieving concerns, all carrying the licence of the Government to thieve, and thieve, and thieve.”

Hugh looked in amazement at this remarkable man, whose aristocratic face was almost becoming contorted with passion as he heatedly developed his curious argument.

“Rubber and Tea and Coffee—egad—what a record. The first—rubber. Dividends obtained as a result of slave-labour and market rigging, a record of artificial slump and booms—dishonesty—knavery *in excelsis*. Tea—a story of much rubbish sold under great names. Coffee—Ha! ha! you get dividends on the world’s coffee. Good quality stuff, reasonably sold—but their plantations! Their plantations! Men, women and

tiny little tots working every hour that there is by the sweat of every pore in their coloured hides, for a miserable existence; and that eked out in an insanitary hut. Thank heaven the mortality is very high in the rainy seasons in rubber, tea and coffee plantations—thus, mercifully, a limit is set to their contributions to the conventional and eminently respectable coffers of Hugh Probyn Valentroyd.

“There remain your Government Securities—these, of course, are met by heavily overtaxing the working-classes, who are much less able to bear taxation than the classes for whom they provide dividends. But you know that, and are doubtless proud of the excellent system that exacts a toll on every cup of tea your charwoman drinks, every tot of spirit she may take to cheer herself up, and every cigarette your street-cleaner manages to buy for himself.”

“That, of course, is Socialism,” said Hugh.

“Socialism be damned,” heatedly replied the President. “What I tell you about so many of the great businesses is plain, straightforward thievery—knavery—and you are a party to it. You live and thrive on it, simply because it has the complete backing, indeed blessing of the powers that be. Yet you shy like a startled two-year-old from what you call crime. Listen to me—my tolls are exacted only against the rich—the very rich. Generally, indeed, I managed to pick out someone who has, to my knowledge, acquired his wealth by means even more shady than the usual mushroom financier. Now I ask you to dismiss your ordinary cut-and-dried maxims and morals for a second and answer which is most moral—the law aside—to rob the rich and cunning of a trifle of their wealth, or to increase the burden of the poor and lowly, to parti-

tion the crust of the slave—for dividends? Which, I say, which?”

Hugh was impressed in spite of himself by the obvious sincerity of the President, and against his better judgment he began to feel that there was something in his arguments after all.

“Oh,” he said. “I suppose, really, it is a more decent thing to take money from those who have a lot than from the poor, but the whole idea of robbery is repulsive to my nature—I suppose it is to most people.”

“Yes, of course, it is,” the President replied. “My late father was beloved by every living soul in the three counties surrounding this estate. His generosity was a proverb—his rents a fraction of the value of his properties. He trusted all men, and the London sharks soon exploited that for all they were worth. I inherited a bankrupt estate. For seven years I tried by rigorous retrenchment to clear the losses and mortgages but the usurious interest flooded me. I was hammered—I lost this estate, and the lands that were in my family for seven hundred years departed to the alien—the men who battered on the blood of my two lads who lie in Flanders mud. Never mind the processes of thought that gradually shaped themselves into a definite policy in my mind, it is sufficient for me to tell you that I visited the underworld of London, Paris, and New York. I formed valuable alliances with men in similar circumstances to myself. Then, by great good fortune, a remarkable discovery came my way—a discovery which you will hear more about later, and I launched the Brick-Bat Club. We are rich, Hugh Valentroyd, rich! do you understand that? And I am delighted to assure you that the alien war profiteer who jumped me out of these estates has been well and duly treated.”

The President smiled grimly, and Hugh could not help rather liking the almost boyish frankness with which this strange man expressed his likes and dislikes. There was also a suggestion of intense power in every flash of his fine grey eyes—in every note of his marvellously sweet, low voice.

“However, my young friend,” concluded the President, “do not be unnecessarily alarmed, I have not the least intention of adding a hopeless amateur to an excellent staff of professional crooks. I have other work for you to do. I shall instruct you in that in due course, but, in order that you may not lose a single moment of your beauty sleep, take my assurance that you will not be required to do anything *naughty and criminal*.”

The President was laughing gaily as he rose. “Now good-night, my boy,” he said, ringing a bell, “good-night—ring for anything you want. Frank, take Mr. Valentroyd to the Blue Room.”

“Good-night, Mr. President,” said Hugh, “and for——”

“Tut, tut—good-night.” The President waved him away, and Hugh followed the footman to a well-appointed bedroom furnished in blue. Immediately the footman withdrew, a valet appeared, and supplied Hugh with such articles as he required, and to his surprise, in spite of the remarkable experience he had just encountered, he found himself going off to sleep almost immediately he laid his head on the pillow.

The light was filtering through the closed curtains when he awoke, and looking at his watch, he saw it was half-past nine. Refreshed by his long, undisturbed sleep, he leapt out of bed and pulled aside the curtains, revealing an exquisite view. Below his window

a shrub garden stretched in three terraces down to a park which was wooded here and there with little copses. Sheep and cattle dotted the expansive park, and strutting down the shrubbery, was a magnificent peacock. Hugh's window was on the side of this house, and he could not help reflecting that if he had lost such a glorious property that had been in his family for so many hundreds of years, he would probably feel just as bitterly as the President towards whoever he judged had filched it from him.

Walking into the adjoining bathroom, he bathed, and assisted by the valet who brought him clean linen, he dressed and descended to the breakfast-room. The butler was supervising the clearing away of the table, but as soon as Hugh appeared, he was all solicitude and the young man was soon enjoying a substantial breakfast. Afterwards he inquired for the President of the butler, who replied:

"His lordship left unexpectedly at 9 a. m., sir."

Hugh would like to have made an inquiry after Sylvia, but felt it would not quite do, perhaps. He strolled out into the grounds after breakfast and decided he would get back to town as the house was apparently deserted—all the guests seemed to have departed. Announcing his intention, the butler told him the 11.5 was a good train from the local station, and a car came round to drive him there. Before he left Hugh wrote a note to the President, announcing his departure for Curzon Square and intimating that he would there await his instructions. He noticed that the notepaper which bore the Halmene family crest was headed, "Halmene Towers."

As he drove away, Hugh glanced back at the magnificent pile, and again sympathised with Viscount

Halmene in his bitterness at losing such a property. It was, indeed, a gem of old English architecture, and its very appearance—its dignity—seemed to give some queer sort of sanction to the President's strange activities.

Arriving in London, Hugh proceeded directly to Curzon Square where his man handed him his accumulated correspondence. Hugh was curious to know how his bag had been packed and given him at the Brick-Bat Club, and what excuse the people there had given James. He said to the old man, in order to draw him:

"I got the bag all right, James."

"Did you, sir? I'm very glad, sir." James could be exasperatingly close at the wrong times, Hugh reflected. He tried again.

"By the way, James, what did you think of the messenger who came for my bag?"

"Sir—if you will permit me to say it, sir, I was shocked, sir, at having to give your belongings into the hands of such a grotesque and disreputable man, sir. I have before told you, sir, that I traced trouble from the time you admitted that unfortunate scarecrow, Whining Willie, into the establishment, and this man when he brought your note to say you were going to Harrogate——"

"By the way, James," said Hugh interrupting him. "You might bring that note, I want to look at something."

James departed, and returned shortly with a letter which he handed to Hugh.

It was amazing. But for the fact that he knew perfectly well he had not written a note, he would have taken it for his own handwriting. It merely informed

James that he was going to Harrogate and asked for a complete change of linen and clothes.

"And, sir, the policeman has been here again, and he says he will call to-day."

"Which policeman?" asked Hugh.

"Inspector Overtley," replied James. "None of these things happened, sir, before you brought that unfortunate——"

"That will do, James," said Hugh in tones that the other knew it was futile to attempt to brave. The butler then left the room with much head-shaking and inaudible mutterings. After looking through his correspondence, Hugh determined to go round to the Brick-Bat Club, where he knew he had now nothing to fear, and there was the chance that he might see Sylvia. He was just preparing to depart, and was being assisted by James with his overcoat, when the door-bell rang and the footman who opened it brought the card of Chief Inspector Overtley. With an exclamation of annoyance Hugh ordered James to show him into the library and he went there himself to receive him, keeping on his overcoat as a sign that he was on the point of going out. The Chief Inspector came in.

"Well, Mr. Valentroyd," he began, "how did you enjoy your stay at Harrogate?"

"Oh! all right, thanks," replied Hugh.

"Mr. Valentroyd, I have specially called on you to beg you to give me all the information you can about the associates of Miss Sylvia Peyton and the late match-seller whom you harboured at this address."

"Oh, surely," said Hugh, "you are not going to waste time by opening that business all over again."

"I hope I shall not waste time," returned the detective. "I have no desire to do so, but it is my duty

to warn you that you are taking a very grave risk in attempting to keep information from the police."

"I have kept nothing from you," said Hugh, prevaricating for Sylvia Peyton's sake. "Now, inspector, if this is all you have to say, I will have to ask you to leave—I am on the point of going out."

"I shall not detain you long, Mr. Valentroyd—at present," said Chief Inspector Overtley, "but you might first tell me where you have been during the last few days?"

"Why, I thought you knew," said Hugh. "You asked me how I enjoyed myself at Harrogate."

"Yes, but where were you?—you were not at Harrogate at all," was the surprising rejoinder. Taken aback, Hugh sought refuge in counter questions.

"How do you know I was not at Harrogate?"

"Simply enough," said the detective. "I wanted to speak to you and I had my own suspicions that when you were last seen entering the Brick-Bat Club you went to some destination that you were afraid and ashamed of outsiders knowing, because, although we kept a watch, we never saw you leave—you evidently left disguised and secretly. I had Harrogate searched, the hotels and trains, boarding-houses and every conceivable quarter as soon as I learnt you had informed your butler you were going there. Now, for the second time, Mr. Valentroyd, be warned by me; tell me what you know."

"I know nothing," said Hugh doggedly.

"Very well," said Inspector Overtley. "You are making your bed—you will have to lie on it. I will ask you one more question before I go. Will you tell me when you saw Miss Sylvia Peyton last?"

"Oh, some weeks ago as I told you before," replied Hugh.

"Are you sure you did not see her on the afternoon the match-seller was murdered? I can use no other word."

"No, I did not," said Hugh.

"She was in Poplar that afternoon, Mr. Valentroyd—is it not curious that you should pay your visit to Poplar on the very afternoon she was seen there?"

"I don't know anything about it," replied Hugh. "I suppose it's your job to find significance in every little coincidence, but I can't help her being there—if she was there."

"Have you seen her since then?"

"No, I tell you, no," replied Hugh.

"You don't know where she is?"

"No, I certainly do not," replied Hugh.

"Very well, there is nothing more to be said, Mr. Valentroyd."

At this moment James entered, tray in hand, on which lay a card, and in his quavering, pompous tones he announced, "Miss Sylvia Peyton."

CHAPTER EIGHT

SYLVIA IS IMPULSIVE

HUGH VALENTROYD could have cursed his butler for announcing the girl in front of the inspector, who stood there with a slightly sarcastic smile on his face. However, he pulled himself together:

"Show the police inspector out," he ordered in firm tones, and with a slight start after a momentary hesitation, Inspector Overtley followed James from the room, giving a curt little bow in Hugh's direction, a courtesy which he frigidly returned.

The unpleasant interview with the officer was forgotten, however, by Hugh in the excitement of the great news that Sylvia was here—actually under his own roof. He was just going to hurry out to meet her in the hall, having allowed sufficient time for Inspector Overtley to depart, when she appeared. There was an impish smile playing about the pretty lips as she came forward quickly and placed her hands in the hands Hugh had outstretched. Laughing merrily, she said:

"So you see I've come into the lion's den this time to find *you*."

"And I was just this moment about to start for the Hawk's nest to find you," replied Hugh.

"Sh—don't joke about that," said the girl with rather a furtive look around her, the fine eyes a trifle clouded, "but, seriously, it is about that that I am here."

"Never mind about that," Hugh said, "let us talk of things that are pleasant and leave all the others."

"Yes, but first let me say what I came to say—do, please."

"Very well," said Hugh. "Say on, serious little Blue Hat."

"Don't chaff always, please, Mr. Valentroyd—really this is very serious." Earnestness was written on every line of her face. Hugh said:

"Then substitute 'Hugh' for Mr. Valentroyd and I'll listen."

"Well, Hugh," the girl pronounced his name with a smile. "I came to see you about what happened last night. I suppose you saw the President afterwards, but he is so very considerate that I'm afraid he would not make clear to you the terrible danger you are in if you break the oath you have taken, and I want to warn you——"

"My dear girl," Hugh interrupted. "You may rest assured that the President—our President—did not allow his consideration to interfere with his warning about the consequences of disobedience. His remarks were not the less forceful because spoken detachedly, as stating a general case and not aimed at me personally. I read the threat, and I take it the terms disobedience and inability to obey are synonymous in the mind of our worthy chief."

"Not inability to obey, oh no," Sylvia quickly said. "You needn't fear that. He never asks you to perform the impossible, and if, through unforeseen circumstances, anything breaks down, after an inquiry, he absolves all from blame and starts doing the same thing all over again in a different way. But you will, for

your own sake, Hugh, you *will* obey and keep your oath, won't you?"

"Of course I will," Hugh responded, "don't worry a bit about that, and now let me talk to you of something else. You know how I have followed you persistently since the night I first saw you. You know what I mean——"

"Oh, Hugh, I begged of you before not to mention that——"

"Why on earth not?" Hugh broke in. "Are we not more closely bound now than ever before. If the society I have joined were twenty times blacker than it is—and I think that would be hard to effect—I would still be proud to be a member of it if you stood by my side. But now that we are both members of the club, which shuts us off to some extent from ordinary people, surely we can possess our own lives. Why should I not tell you that I love you? You know I do."

"Hugh, Hugh, don't, I entreat you, don't! don't!" Hugh would have taken her in his arms but she struggled fiercely and he released her. "Then, of course, you mean I am too late," bitterly Hugh flung the words at her, and they hurt. Tears immediately filled the large violet eyes.

"Don't be cruel, Hugh," she cried, "if things had been otherwise——"

"Listen, darling, if things had been otherwise, would you have come to me? Could you have, perhaps, loved me—a little?"

"Hugh, I love you now—no, don't," for he stepped forward again, "but believe me when I tell you that there is a fearful, terrible tragedy in my life which is quite outside my connection with the Brick-Bat Club, and that tragedy makes it impossible for anything like

this between you and me. Now don't ask questions, because I can't answer them."

"Just this one, darling—is it some other man standing in the way?"

"No, it has nothing to do with that sort of barrier at all, but all the same it is insurmountable." Sadly she said the words, yet the regret in her tones gladdened Hugh, for it was a confession again of her love for him, and it spurred him on to try to elucidate the inscrutable mystery which held the life of this beautiful girl in thrall.

"You say it is entirely apart from the club?" he asked.

"Not entirely apart, but it is in addition to, and apart from, the activities of the club."

"Will it never be possible," he queried, "for you to tell me all about it? Can I do simply nothing?"

"Perhaps, some day, I may be able to tell you, certainly not now," replied the girl, "but I didn't come to talk about this at all, Hugh, and I must go."

Hugh walked over to open the door. Out of respect for her manifest wish he made no further attempt to press for more information. Opening the door, he silently waited for her to pass. She reached the door, then with a tiny gloved hand closed it almost, as she said:

"Hugh, you're not vexed with me, are you?"

"No, of course not," he replied, and the next second this strange, impulsive girl, who carried a tragedy that she evidently had to bear alone, had flung her arms about his neck and was kissing him.

For a minute they remained so—she was the first to break away.

"Hugh, I must be stark, raving mad—let me go,

good-bye, darling," and no sooner had she spoken than she opened the door and rushed out, he following. In the hall the disapproving red face of old James appeared, as he stepped forward to open the hall door for her. Gaily she tripped down the steps, turned and waved her hand, and the next moment was gone:

"I may say, sir——" began the old butler.

"Oh! I don't want your comments on my guests, James, and I won't have them."

"Certainly not, sir, certainly not," replied old James with a comical, malicious light in his eyes. "I wouldn't dream of commenting on your guests, sir. What I was about to say, sir, was that the policeman, sir, asked me how often the little lady came here, sir."

"Intolerable insolence to question my servants," exclaimed Hugh. "What did you say, James?"

"I said," replied the privileged old butler, spitefully wiping off a whole list of rebuffs at one stroke, "I said, sir, that I 'oped, sir, I was too discreet to talk to strangers about the comings and goings of the young person, sir."

"James, if you were about a hundred and fifty years younger, you doddering old dotard," thundered Valentroyd, "I would put my boot behind you and kick you down the steps never to return."

"I 'ope, sir——" but Hugh seized his hat and rushed out.

For miles he walked—he never quite remembered where he did walk that afternoon, and the joy in his heart, because he knew now, so certainly, that Sylvia loved him, was undimmed by the very consciousness he had of her danger, and of the sinister circumstances in which he himself stood. But if Hugh Valentroyd never remembered the details of that afternoon walk someone

else did, for from the moment he left the house until his return, three hours afterwards, tired out, a tall, keen-eyed man dogged his footsteps, and even when Hugh had returned, this stranger stayed some time outside the house until he was relieved by another man of a similar type to himself.

Hugh dined at home and did not again leave the house. For one thing he was tired out, and, in addition, he thought he might possibly have a message from Sylvia, but he had none. Neither that day nor the next did he hear anything. On the third day he determined to move again himself, so he went round to the Brick-Bat Club.

He wondered how he could prove his membership so as to secure admittance, because, though he knew only too well that he was a member, yet he had not a single vestige of proof. Finally he decided to try to get in, and if he encountered any difficulty to refer once more to the Hawk. Again he passed through the vestibule and deposited his hat and coat in the cloak-room, then approached the double doors of the large downstairs room which had such strange memories for him.

On this occasion the two lackeys in charge of the door merely bowed and opened it to admit him. Evidently he was recognised, but by what process he could not tell. Seating himself at a corner table, he ordered tea, which was quickly brought; then he fell to examining the other people in the room—his fellow-members, indeed. Again the cosmopolitan character of the club impressed itself upon him. There was an old white-bearded man, for instance, whom Hugh felt he had seen somewhere on the Continent. The old fellow was already in evening-dress, though the hour was still early, and he wore the ribbon and star of a famous

Italian order. Also he observed a typical German, chatting to a man whose strident Scotch accents needed no further support to attest his nationality. Several Americans were in evidence, and one or two men of colour.

Hugh noticed that a number seated there did not seem to know each other, and, indeed, seemed to be looking around with similar curiosity to his own. Very few women were present, only about a dozen, and they were rather a remarkable collection, for, while three or four were obviously of a type to be found in any café or night club, the remainder were of a higher social standing. While he mused on these things, Hugh felt a light touch on his shoulder, and, turning, he encountered the laughing, half-mocking violet eyes he had come to love so well. Sylvia was wearing a walking-costume and was evidently on the point of departure.

"Hello, my dear——" began Hugh, but she stopped him.

"Sh—not so loud," she said. "Listen quickly, I'm just off—I'm going away, you may not see me for some time. Don't come here more than you can help unless you're ordered to—it's not wise. Good-bye."

"But, Sylvia," Hugh expostulated. "I want to talk to you. Where are you going?"

"I can't tell you that—indeed, I don't quite know myself yet; I'll communicate with you as soon as I can. Oh! there's one thing more—then I must go—someone is waiting—listen." The girl took a quick glance round, then, satisfied she could not be overheard, continued: "If you should meet Eunice de Laine, and I rather think you will, be careful. She's beautiful and she's clever, and has a 'way' with men, I suppose," Syl-

via's lips curled scornfully, "but I am sure she is my enemy—be on your guard. Now really—good-bye."

Hugh just had time to grip her hand for a second before she withdrew it. Then she darted to the door and the next moment was gone. Hugh followed as quickly as he could but there was no trace of her. How could she think Eunice de Laine was her enemy? Surely not, Hugh thought; still, he would watch Eunice if he met her, though probably it was only a little fit of jealousy on Sylvia's part, and there was a certain satisfaction in that. She thought him worth being jealous about. He mattered to her. Hugh felt much better for the meeting, though so brief, with Sylvia, and that night looked very optimistically upon the whole affair. It would straighten out all right in the end without doubt, he felt, and he went to bed quite happily. But many things were yet to happen before that came to pass!

On the following morning the newspapers gave much space to a frightful outrage in Regent Street. An elderly jeweller, named Marnington, had been awakened in the night by a servant, who told him his shop had been burgled and that two detectives were waiting downstairs to interview him. Quickly dressing, he had hurried downstairs, and had presently left the house accompanied by the two police-officers. As he did not return after several hours, an inquiry had been made by his daughter, who lived with him, which elicited the response from Scotland Yard that they knew nothing about the matter at all, but would proceed to deal with it forthwith. The daughter, thoroughly anxious by now, dressed and drove quickly to the shop, where she found several police-officers standing outside, but the

place was locked and the only unusual things she noticed were that the iron gate guarding the door was unlocked and several more lights were burning than was usually the case in the rear of the premises.

The inspector in charge listened as Miss Marnington told again what she had told the Yard over the telephone, then he said that, to the knowledge of the police, no one had been sent to her father, but the policeman on the beat had noticed a car pull up and three men approach the shop. The constable had moved forward, then, recognising her father, whom he knew by sight, he had gone on, satisfied that it was all right. He had not actually seen the men come out, but from a short distance up the street he had seen the car depart.

The inspector ascertained that Mr. Marnington kept all the important keys himself. Being of an old-fashioned disposition, he had not even entrusted a key of the safe to his manager. It was then that the officer decided to effect an entry, which was quickly done. In the shop it was soon apparent that something untoward had happened, for all the show-cases had been cleared of small valuable objects.

They proceeded to the cellar in which stood the strong-room which, in turn, contained the safes. Here, still further evidence of crime was apparent, for on the worn carpet which covered the floor of the store-cellar, just at the door of the strong-room, was a blood-stain. The strong-room was locked, but the inspector telephoned to Scotland Yard and soon experts arrived who opened the door, and when this was done there was disclosed the huddled up corpse of Mr. Marnington. His head had been battered in with some heavy instrument, and further investigation showed that jewels to the value of £50,000 had been stolen.

The newspapers gave a description of the two men who had called at the house, and this description had been given wide publicity, but, up to now, no further clue had been published.

Hugh had just finished reading the account when a short note arrived for him, and its imperative character indicated very clearly to him that the oath he had taken was not a mere form, for the note read:

“Prepare to leave England immediately, and report at the club within half-an-hour.”

“What infernal cheek,” he thought, not so much as a “Will you?” or “Please,” and evidently the fellow took acceptance of the order and obedience for granted because the messenger had said: “No reply.”

Leave England forthwith! Not if he knew it! Then, more calmly, Hugh reflected that it was probably for just such an eventuality as this that Sylvia had come round specially to warn him always to obey, and he had promised her that he would keep his oath. In any event, he reflected grimly, the threats of the Brick-Bat Club were no idle ones, and to disobey was to follow in the wake of Raymond Gaunt and Whining Willie. What was this mysterious death which overtook the disobedient members and the enemies of the Brick-Bat Club? Hugh could not tell; it had puzzled the doctors evidently, and he determined that he would not give any opportunity for the unleashing of the horror in his case. Ringing the bell, he said to James:

“Pack my bag for a week—within twenty minutes.” Then he busied himself with such correspondence as was urgent and attended to other personal arrangements. Within the half hour he was at the club, and as he entered the large room, the big fellow with whom he had had such an unpleasant encounter in the Hawk’s

room came straight up to him, grinning from ear to ear.

"The 'Awk wants you, sir, in his nest," he said, and Hugh, who knew the grin was reminiscent of his first visit uninvited to the Hawk, smiled, too, for he liked this good-natured "bruiser" who had not forgotten to give him cigarettes when in captivity.

The Hawk was seated at his desk, and he looked up as Hugh entered:

"Good-morning," he said. "Here's a letter from the President, who wants you in Marseilles at once. I have an aeroplane waiting for you at Croydon—got a passport or shall I give you one? Got one? Right—want any money—No? Right—Good-bye," and before Hugh quite realised what had happened, he found himself speeding to the aerodrome, the President's letter in his hand, bound for an adventure the character of which he had not the faintest notion.

CHAPTER NINE

A MISSION OF IMPORTANCE

HUGH VALENTROYD reached the aerodrome where he found a machine had been waiting for half-an-hour, and, having negotiated the necessary formalities, within five minutes was in the air.

The machine was a bi-plane and could have carried four passengers, but Hugh was the only one, and as soon as he had got accustomed to the motion of the machine, he opened his letter. It was brief, consisting merely of an order to proceed to the Hôtel Bristol, but especially to hurry.

As the 'plane progressed, and presently the Channel dotted by various tiny ships lay below them, Hugh wondered what the hurried flight could mean.

The President had assured him that he was not to be used for criminal purposes—but had rather hinted at some political adventure of a mysterious sort. He wondered if he would see Sylvia at Marseilles, and sincerely hoped he might. Had she not departed suddenly for some unknown destination upon the day of the Regent Street murder? Hugh fell to wondering for the thousandth time that such a girl as Sylvia could be associated with an organisation like the Brick-Bat Club. That her connection with it was an innocent one he was sure, both because he felt she was incapable of evil, and also on account of his own innocent and involuntary entry to its membership.

The Channel passed, the 'plane made excellent progress in the direction of Paris, which was safely reached and a landing made. While the machine was being overhauled and refilled with petrol, Hugh entered the well-appointed little restaurant adjoining the Paris Aerodrome, and had a light meal. In half-an-hour they were off again. The weather was magnificent; not a cloud in the sky and no wind.

Far below, like a toy train, Hugh could see the famous Blue Train, the Mediterranean Express, wending its way through the fertile valleys, and in rapid succession, towns, villages, outlying farms, and bleak-looking plains, contrasting forcibly with the warm-looking forest-lands, were all passed, and, at last, the deep-blue waters of the Mediterranean appeared, and the 'plane came to rest on the high aerodrome at Marseilles. Hugh bade good-bye to the pilot and stepped into a car that was waiting for him from the Hôtel Bristol. Arriving there, the first person he saw as he entered the vestibule was the tall, dark and good-looking Eunice de Laine. With manifest pleasure she greeted him.

"Hello, Mr. Valentroyd—I *am* glad to see you—do you know it is only within the last hour that I learnt you were coming? Had I known before I should certainly have been at the 'drome to meet you."

"That's very nice of you," replied Hugh. "I am glad to see you, too. I suppose I must find our President now and report my arrival."

"Here he comes," announced Eunice, and sure enough at that moment the tall, distinguished Viscount Halmene entered the lounge from the main staircase.

"Ah, there you are, Valentroyd," he said; "so glad you've arrived safely—and quickly. We're going to

have a snack here—quite informally—and then we're going aboard the lugger, my lad. Pop off now if you want to take the star-dust off your face and hands. Eunice and I will wait for you here."

"Don't look so frightened, Mr. Valentroyd," Eunice laughingly said, as Hugh looked a little bewildered. "When the President talks about the 'lugger' he means quite a jolly yacht—I love yachting."

"So do I," said Hugh. "I shan't be five minutes," and he hurried off to remove the traces of his hurried travel.

Dinner in the Grill Room of the Bristol was a jolly affair. The President proved himself an excellent host, and Hugh noticed that one or two dishes had been specially ordered, and the *maître d'hôtel* beamed his pleasure when the President congratulated him. Over the meal no word was mentioned of the business that had brought Hugh at such express speed from London, and he felt thoroughly pleased with his friends, his food, his wine and himself. Only one thing worried him, and that was that up to now he had seen and heard nothing of Sylvia.

Coffee and old brandy being served, and the President having presented Hugh with an excellent cigar from his case, Eunice slipped off, leaving the two men alone. The President at once broached the business in hand.

"Now, Valentroyd," he began, pushing aside an ash-tray and leaning across the table. "I've sent for you, because something upon which I have been working for many months is approaching fruition, and I need your services. When we leave here, we are going aboard my yacht, the *Falcon*, which is lying down in the harbour there under steam. We're going straight to Leghorn,

and you are going to take a sealed packet from me to the Foreign Minister of Latinia. You will bring his reply. Here comes Eunice; I shall not say more of this just now—there's plenty of time.

"Now, my girl," he turned to Eunice, "have you got all the gloves and handkerchiefs and face powder and things you want—yes?" as Eunice laughed an affirmative. "Have you anything to do ashore, Valentroyd?" Hugh replied that he had not. "Good," said the President, rising. "Then let the battle commence—Jules, get my car."

Swiftly did the *maître d'hôtel* send someone, who almost instantly returned.

"The automobile attend, m'lord," pronounced Jules in a valorous attempt to compliment his distinguished guest by using an English sentence which he had been practising for the last few minutes, following an inspiration as he served the port.

A fresh, stimulating breeze blowing off the sea brought the ozone to their faces as the car rushed along the quay.

"There's the *Falcon*, Mr. Valentroyd," said Eunice, and following the direction of her pointed finger, Hugh saw, lying off in the harbour, a beautifully-lined white yacht with two brass funnels. Her tapering stem and long, low hull suggested speed, and the glistening whiteness of her paint, the golden glitter of her brass-work, now brightly reflecting the rays of the setting sun, told of an ample crew and good discipline.

The car stopped at a flight of steps, at the bottom of which the yacht's dinghy was waiting, and dismissing his car, the President led the way down the steps, and a couple of sailors pulled them rapidly off to the yacht.

Arriving there, they were met at the head of the

companion-way by the elderly captain—a trim figure, wearing a closely-cut beard and having a general air of capability about him. He saluted the President, who chatted to him for a minute or so, then introduced him to Hugh. The captain greeted Eunice, whom he evidently knew well, and sent a junior officer to escort them both to their respective quarters. While Hugh was inspecting the delightful cabin which had been appointed to him, he heard the anchor-chain being drawn in, the engines begin their vibrating roar, the propellers make their first revolution, and they were under way. He came on deck to find Eunice already there and the yacht making its way through the shipping lying outside the harbour.

“Isn’t it lovely,” she said. “You know I always, wet or fine, come on deck when entering or leaving Marseilles to look at that little island there where poor Monte Cristo was imprisoned all those years. Even on a lovely night like this I feel quite sad when I think of him.”

“But, my dear girl,” said Hugh, looking at the rugged rock which formed the setting of Dumas’ famous novel, “it’s only a romance—no such person as Monte Cristo ever lived, really.”

“Oh! but he did——” replied the girl in protest. “I feel sure he did—I love the story, and the wonderful way in which he got his own back on a society that had treated him so shamefully. Don’t you feel like that about it?”

“Well, I sympathise with him in the sense that in the book he is made to suffer so much that one cannot blame him if he hit out a bit in return.”

“Oh, in the book!” Scornfully Eunice turned on him. “Can’t you see that even if it was only a story,

the same story is being enacted over and over and over again in real life every day? 'Cannot blame him,' you say! I would have blamed him for a dolt and a fool if he hadn't got his own back when opportunity came." There was such bitterness in Eunice's voice—such a wild, defiant look in her fine eyes that Hugh knew he had had a momentary glimpse into this strange, wayward, rebellious girl's soul. It was only momentary, for next second she had recovered her customary jolly, easy manner. But that passing moment had convinced Hugh that some deep tragedy had probably lain hidden in this girl's life for many a year, making her hard and bitter in her judgments—aye, probably it had driven her into the organisation of which men like the Hawk were high officers, men like the cheerful thug honourable members, and all taking their orders from the President, who was an enigma writ large.

While they stood watching the last rays of the setting sun sink beneath the horizon, they were joined by the President, and the conversation became general.

They stayed on deck until quite late, then Eunice excused herself, and the President and Hugh retired to the saloon after bidding her good-night. Hugh, whose whole being had been touched by the little episode with Eunice, would have liked to offer her his sympathy. As she bade him good-night, he put extra pressure into his handshake, and she must have understood, for a look of sincere affection shone in her dark eyes and her "Good-night" was spoken with a softness that carried a message of appreciation.

The President looked after her thoughtfully, blew a cloud of cigar smoke from his mouth, and then said:

"Dashed fine girl that, Valentroyd, gets what she wants every time, and she wants *you*, I can tell that, as

easily as I can tell that I need a whisky and soda. And she'll get you, my lad, I can tell that as well."

"Whatever makes you think anything so silly, Mr. President?" Hugh coloured as he protested. "I've only met the girl three or four times and have never given such a thing a thought."

"Oh! very probably," returned the President. "Only she was a bit off her guard to-night—outsiders see most of the game. I watched the way she looked at you when she said 'Good-night.' I noticed how pleased she seemed when I told her to-night that you were coming. Ha! Ha! Ha!—never mind, my lad—I'll bet ten to one on her to begin with! I'll give you my blessing in any case—let's have a drink."

As he entered the saloon, the President swept a number of newspaper-cuttings to one side from the table and, his eye happening to catch them, Hugh saw, to his surprise, that they were all accounts of the Regent Street murder and robbery. He did not comment on the strange fact, however, and the President and he talked on all manner of things, ranging from Eton, at which school both had been, to current politics. Neither referred to the business in hand, to Eunice de Laine or to Sylvia Peyton, about whom Hugh was longing to make an inquiry. After midnight, the President rose.

"You must be tired, Valentroyd. I'm sorry I've kept you like this. Garrulity, my lad, is an unfailing accompaniment to age—good-night."

Hugh bade him good-night, and retired to his cabin to sleep until he was awakened by the steward at 8.30 with his tea.

The next two days passed pleasantly—the sun shone continually on the blue waters of the Mediterranean, and as the end of the voyage approached, Hugh could

not help a certain feeling of regret at leaving his companions. Most of the time he had been in Eunice's company, for the President spent several hours in the morning, and always two hours in the afternoon, writing messages in code in reply to ones that came to him. Sometimes the messages seemed to cause him annoyance, and he would break off any conversation he might be engaged in, think profoundly for a time, then, with the help of a little code book, write out a message which was duly dispatched by wireless.

Sometimes the messages seemed to contain good news, or news that the President found amusing, for he would chuckle heartily, tear the message up, and write something in return. Eunice had been an excellent companion, always jolly, well-informed on every conceivable subject, and though her experience had been wide, she had none of the aggressive "manishness" that so many women acquire who have lived independent lives and have travelled far and associated with a wide range of people. Instead, Eunice de Laine retained a sweet femininity which was an added charm in Hugh's eyes. Only one thing troubled him, and that was he had never heard Sylvia's name mentioned. He had consistently refrained from questioning the President about her, partly because he feared the old man's chaff, but more particularly because he felt he might be doing no service to Sylvia. She had told him so emphatically that there could be nothing between them on account of some mystery in her life, and no good purpose could be served by him allowing the President to think he had any special interest in her.

On the day they expected to reach Leghorn, the President called him into the saloon, and, seating him-

self opposite to him, offered him a cigar, poured out some whisky, then addressed him.

"Now, my boy I'll give you your 'last minute instructions,'" he began. "The mission upon which I send you is an important one—far more important than you dream of—and I am choosing you to undertake it for two reasons. In the first place, with you the pecuniary element does not enter, and although I have means of fortifying my trust in my members, yet such a colossal thing is involved here that I feel safer in trusting it to someone like yourself. You see, whoever handles this job, becomes at some stage possessed of my very 'fire' in a literal sense. I mean the knowledge comes to him of the secret death which has puzzled everybody for so long.

"In the second place, I am sending you because you look the right type of man to deal with state officials. You are of the type from which the Diplomatic Corps draws its recruits. I am deliberately telling you no more at this stage because I don't want the conversation between you and the exalted personage you will certainly meet in the capital of Latinia to go beyond the terms of reference contained in this sealed letter."

The President produced a fat envelope addressed in his strong, clear hand to Count Radicati, of the Foreign Affairs Bureau, of the Latinian Government. Hugh noticed that in the top left hand corner was a meaningless conglomeration of letters, and, following his gaze, the President said:

"That is a cipher, and assures you getting through to the Count without trouble." Hugh took the letter, which he noticed was heavily sealed, and put it in an inside pocket.

"Yes," commented the President. "Put that away

as safely as you know how. I don't think you will have any trouble, because you are so utterly unknown, and you are proceeding by an unusual route. But I don't mind telling you that if I were to go myself I would lose that note before I had been ashore twenty minutes. Every Secret Service in Europe has its weather eye on me. By the way, have you got a revolver?"

Hugh had not, and said so.

"You know how to use that, of course." His host passed a little Browning across the table. "Just slip it into your pocket 'in case.'"

Hugh smiled and pocketed the pistol, which he first examined and found fully loaded.

"Now, that is really all," said the President. "You will proceed to the capital from Leghorn, get straight through to Count Radicati, tell him nothing—he may try to pump you—and bring his letter back as quickly as you can—ah! there goes the anchor, we're there. Come on."

Hugh followed the President to the deck and gazed on the scene before him. They were lying just in the harbour entrance, and the old sun-blanchéd town of Leghorn looked beautiful in the sunlight. Eunice de Laine was already on the deck and she turned to point out some object of interest to Hugh.

"Yes, yes, my dear," interrupted the President. "You must tell him all those things later—he's in a hurry now." Hugh slipped into his cabin to snatch a light raincoat and his bag, and in another two minutes was being rowed ashore in a boat.

Eunice waved to him from the yacht's rail, and the President yelled: "Good luck, old man," and then he was out of earshot. His adventure had begun.

Passing up into the old quay, he took an antiquated

horse carriage to the station, where he found the train to the capital left in an hour-and-a-quarter. Having bought his ticket, he strolled about the station for a while; then, as the train rattled into the station from Genoa, he selected a compartment and put his bag down in a corner, to mark his seat—then continued his stroll. He little dreamt that a pair of shrewd eyes were watching his every movement. A short, insignificant little man followed wherever he went, never observed—sometimes he dodged behind a pillar—sometimes round a corner—frequently behind luggage waggons, until Hugh passed near the public telephones at the entrance to the carriage approach.

Then the little man dodged into a box and excitedly rang up somebody, and, had Hugh watched, he would have seen that in another five minutes the little man was joined by a colleague. The pair chatted quickly for a few moments, never losing sight of Hugh the while, and presently separated. Quite unconscious of the interest he was causing, Hugh returned to his compartment and settled himself on the dusty green velvet cushions. One of his followers got into the compartment immediately ahead of him.

The other waited until the train was actually on the move, then jumped lightly into a compartment further back.

CHAPTER TEN

TWO SHOCKS FOR HUGH

AFTER a long and weary journey, Hugh Valentroyd arrived at the ancient but gay capital of Latinia without any untoward incident, and drove straight to the great imposing Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As he left the station, the two men who had consistently shadowed him from Leghorn, followed him, and as he entered the ornate portals that gave entrance to the Bureau of Foreign Affairs, they went some distance away and kept careful watch on the doorway for his reappearance.

In the meantime, Hugh, entering, filled up the form provided for visitors, to indicate whom he wanted to see and the nature of his business. He wrote that he wished to see Count Radicati, and marked the "business" line with the cipher on the corner of the envelope.

Within five minutes, the uniformed messenger, who had taken the form from him, returned and bade him follow him, saying that Count Radicati awaited him.

Hugh entered a lift and ascended to the second floor, which was the main floor of the building, and followed his guide along a wide corridor until he stopped at a plain mahogany door. The messenger knocked, and in response to an invitation, entered, announcing Hugh.

Then as the messenger stood aside, holding the door open, Hugh entered. Advancing into the large airy room, he confronted a man whose photograph was

familiar to him, even as it was to thousands who read the newspapers. This was the man that the Press of Europe unanimously agreed was the arbiter of peace and war. The Dictator of Latinia, more in the lime-light, had on occasion been brought to heel by the venerable and astute old man with whom Hugh now found himself closeted. The old Count looked anything but like the Machiavellian character he had earned himself in the European chancelleries. His head was covered with upstanding white hair—a lot of it, carefully brushed. His snow-white beard covered his chest, completely screening his collar and tie, and his bushy white eyebrows shaded the most innocent looking blue eyes in five Continents. Tall—the Count was just under six feet, and with a slightness of figure that accentuated his height. He was, in spite of his advanced years, as straight as a lath.

Now the innocent blue eyes were turned on Hugh as he advanced to meet him, and, bowing politely, the Count greeted his guest in English.

“I welcome the representative of my friend, Viscount Halmene.” The words, though formal, were spoken in perfect English, without a trace of an accent.

“I am honoured to meet Your Excellency,” returned Hugh, and took the Count’s outstretched hand.

“I have to deliver you this letter,” he added, and placed the sealed packet he had received from the President in the Count’s hands. The latter again bowed, then, excusing himself, sat down at his desk and proceeded to open and read the letter. It was evidently in code, for almost immediately Count Radicati referred to a small gold-bound book which he took from his waistcoat-pocket. For some time he was engaged in deciphering the letter, only stopping for a second to

offer Hugh some illustrated newspapers to look at. When he had finished translating, he remained for some time deep in thought. Sometimes his eyes wandered from the letter to Hugh, and then back again. At last he spoke.

"Signor Valentroyd," he said, "are you in a position to speak further—to give any details to amplify the contents of my friend's letter?"

"I am not, Your Excellency," replied Hugh. "Indeed, the contents of the letter are unknown to me. I merely was commissioned to be the bearer of what I am instructed is an important document, and to secure your reply to bring back safely to Lord Halmene."

Silently the Count bowed, remained another minute or so in thought, then rising, said:

"Before a reply can be drafted I must consult someone. I shall leave you for several minutes here. May I send you any refreshment?"

"No, thank you," replied Hugh. "I will have dinner after I leave."

"*Benissimo!* But I am not quite sure whether you will or not," replied the old diplomat. "You had better accept my offer now, and have a little something, in case dinner is not practicable at the moment."

Without waiting for Hugh's reply, he left the room, and presently a liveried servant entered, bearing a tray on which were set a flask of white Orvieto and a number of sandwiches. Hugh, who was feeling hungry, did justice to the light meal. After he had finished, he waited for fully half-an-hour before the Count came back. On the latter's return, Hugh noticed that something had occurred to ruffle the venerable old man. There was a restless, nervous movement about his fingers as he fumbled with an envelope, large and heav-

ily sealed. He walked up and down the room several times before he spoke.

"You have already said, Signor Valentroyd, and of course I accept your word, that you know nothing of the contents of the letter you have delivered to me. I wonder if you would tell me if you have taken a similar letter elsewhere or if, in your knowledge, any approach has been made to any other quarter than this office?"

"I certainly have not taken a letter anywhere else," truthfully replied Hugh, "and I certainly know nothing of any such letter being addressed elsewhere."

"Were you followed here to-night, Signor Valentroyd?"

"Followed?" Hugh spoke wonderingly. "No—not that I know of."

"Then, Signor Valentroyd, you are being shadowed now, at any rate. My special police have ascertained that two men are closely watching this office at the present moment. One of them is a well-known spy in the service of Britain—the other is evidently an associate of his, for they have been seen in conversation together. Now, in order to facilitate your safe return to Lord Halmene, I propose to smuggle you through the back way of this office which abuts on the Ministry of the Interior. Then in the Piazza Vittorio a car will await you, which will drive you to Sforzia Medici, where I have arranged to have the Leghorn express stopped for you. In the meantime, I will have these two watchers arrested on some pretext or other. A few hours in a cell will do them no harm and will prevent them making any arrangements to embarrass you, Signor Valentroyd."

Hugh was amazed at the cheerful way in which the remarkable old man could talk of dangers, the machina-

tions of spies, and arrests. Indeed, the old Count was almost genial, as he said:

"You see now, Signor Valentroyd, how wise you were in having a bite to eat. Before I received you, I knew you had been followed."

Hugh, who was busy buttoning away the dispatch that the old diplomat had given him, could only wonder at the tremendous capacity of the man for anticipating every conceivable eventuality. He began to see that the name the Count had earned for Machiavellian cunning was not unmerited. He followed the old man through a series of passages and through several doors which his distinguished guide opened with a pass-key, and finally they emerged through the large marble-pillared portico of the Ministry of Justice and descended a broad flight of steps to where a large touring car was waiting.

"At some distance before the car another will travel carrying police," said the Count, "and, similarly, you will be covered a hundred or so yards behind. I shall see you again, I hope. *Addio!*"

"*Au revoir!* and many thanks," said Hugh as he stepped into the large tonneau of the car, which immediately moved off.

Darkness was falling as the car rushed through the vineyards, and in the huge beams from the headlights Hugh could occasionally distinguish another car some distance ahead, while, when he turned and looked behind, he could see the headlights of another one which maintained a distance of about five hundred yards behind. He felt a sense of security in the measures the old man had taken for his safety.

When about an hour had passed, the car drew up beside some level-crossing gates by a wayside station,

and a man, who had been riding in front beside the chauffeur, alighted, and opening the door, announced:

“Sforzia Medici, Excellency—the express is due in a few minutes.”

Hugh thanked him, and alighted. He was evidently expected, for the station-master came forward with many bowings, hand-lamp in hand, and preceded Hugh into his tiny office, where in voluble Latinian he pointed out that the express had passed the section in rear and was within ten miles. He pressed Hugh to have a glass of wine, and to oblige the old chap, who evidently, and not unnaturally, wished to keep himself right with his superiors, he accepted. The station-master talked volubly of the vintage of the year, of the good times that had come to the country since the present Dictator’s régime, and all the while surveyed Hugh curiously. Was not the great Leghorn and Milan night express by way of Sarzana to be stopped specially for this foreign Excellency? Such a thing had never happened before, and he would see to it that no complaints of discourtesy would be made against him by so august a passenger.

The rumble of the distant train was the signal for their departure to the platform, and as it entered the station, the brakes were applied, and it stopped, a guard dropped from the front van, and saluting Hugh, turned along before him to a locked reserved compartment, into which he ushered the special passenger. Hugh, having seated himself, the door was closed, and the train set off over the interminable maremma marshes to Leghorn. For two hours he was undisturbed as the night-train rocked its way over the rough Latinian railroad. Then suddenly the door of the corridor opened and two men entered the compartment, seating

themselves on the two seats on the corridor side. Hugh glanced curiously at them and they both looked at him.

No word was spoken—the men had scarcely time to seat themselves when a railway official entered hurriedly, followed instantly by two men in plain-clothes. To his amazement Hugh saw that these men had revolvers in their hands. The railway official spoke to the two men seated in the carriage.

“Signori, this compartment is reserved—please leave,” and one of the men in plain-clothes deliberately placed himself between Hugh and the two intruders. The latter with startled looks and slight shrugs grunted some sort of an apology and instantly withdrew. The official bowed to Hugh and apologised for the slight disturbance, then the three left the compartment, leaving Hugh wondering as to the meaning of the incident. He arrived at the conclusion that evidently some attempt had been made to secure the letter he carried, and began to have a new admiration for men of the Secret Service who must discharge their duties efficiently, and continually run risks without anything like the excellent protection he was receiving. He wished he was back on the yacht. The sense of responsibility for the safe keeping of the letter was disturbing. Without further incident, however, the journey was completed, and in the small hours the train entered the badly-lit station at Leghorn. Hugh hurried along the platform, and was about to inquire for a vehicle of some sort, when the official who had travelled on the same train, came up behind him, and said:

“A car has been provided for you, Signor Valentroyd. You are being carefully escorted—have no fear.”

Hugh thanked him, and entered a closed car—again,

he noticed, the middle one of three—and as the mean streets lying between the station and the quay were traversed, he observed that the cars kept much closer together than the others had done on the open road. Crossing at the quay, Hugh saw in the distance lights burning on the *Falcon*, but as he had no means of signalling her to send a boat, he was about to have recourse to a waterman, when again evidence of the thoroughness of his Latinian protection was forthcoming, for the official blew a whistle, and was instantly answered from the water, whereupon he set off down a flight of steps, beckoning Hugh to follow to where a Customs launch was lying. Bowing, he stood aside for Hugh to step in, then politely wished him "*bon voyage*" as the launch slid off to the *Falcon*.

Several uniformed Customs officers were on the launch, but none spoke to Hugh, beyond agreeing with him that it was a beautiful night. They were evidently a little nervous of this stranger, who came with such a powerful escort, and evidently with such strong influence that the very Customs launches were placed at his disposal in the middle of the night. The *Falcon* reached, a sailor met him at the companion-way, and evidently the President had given instructions to be called should Hugh return, because, as the latter made his way to the saloon, he was met by the old man himself wearing a dressing-gown over his sleeping-suit.

"Ah, there you are, my lad?" he greeted Hugh. "Come and have a drink. All right, I suppose?"

"Yes, Mr. President—at least, I've brought a letter," Hugh said.

"Good! Good!" returned the President. "Thanks," as Hugh handed him the sealed letter. "Do help your-

self to some whisky—had anything to eat? The steward's assistant is waiting in case. That's right," he added, as Hugh thanked him and ordered some sandwiches.

Whilst Valentroyd munched his sandwiches, the President sat deciphering the letter which was a long one. Long after Hugh had finished his meal, he remained at his task. After some time he looked up.

"Valentroyd, my boy, you must be tired—turn in."

"Thanks very much," replied Hugh, "but are you sure I can be of no service to you?"

"None whatever. You go and get a night's rest. You can tell me all about your adventures to-morrow."

Hugh retired, and slept soundly until far into the forenoon. It was a queer thing to him, that, whatever the nefarious designs of the President might be, however unscrupulous he must be, to judge from the number and quality of his associates that he had encountered, yet there was something so great in his personality that he was conscious of a curious feeling of security when with the President. Probably, he reflected as he dressed, this was one of the things that contributed to his control over his motley following.

Entering the saloon, he noticed that a cover remained for him from breakfast, and he was presently served with a meal to which he did full justice. While he was eating, Eunice de Laine came in, and Hugh reflected upon how beautiful she looked. There was something clean, healthy, and sparkling about the girl, and the yachting costume of blue-and-white accentuated this to advantage.

"My poor dear," she began, "you *must* have been tired. I've got a shock for you first; then you can tell me all about your adventures. Here's the shock."

Into his hands she placed a letter addressed to him in the President's large firm handwriting. Hugh opened it, and read:

"My dear Valentroyd. You have done well. It has been necessary for me to depart immediately, and I will pick you up at Cairo. You will take charge of the yacht. I have advised the captain, and you and Eunice will proceed with it to Alexandria, then go to Shepherd's at Cairo. There I will meet you both.

"YOUR PRESIDENT."

Hugh was aghast. It was an impossible situation for a girl like Eunice to be alone on a yacht with him in the Mediterranean. Of what could the President be thinking? Yet the last two words were, in themselves, a friendly ending to a short note, and at the same time a stinging reminder of his oath of obedience. "Your President." Yes, he was commanded, he must obey, and for himself he did not mind much, except that he was anxious to hear some news of Sylvia Peyton. It was the girl Eunice de Laine, and her position, that worried him. He looked up to encounter her trying to suppress shrieks of laughter with a silken tea-cosy.

"You poor dear thing," she said, between her peals. "I knew that would get your poor conventionality on the raw. I'm very sorry for you though, poor man, really I am."

"You don't seem to understand," Hugh retorted. "It is for you that I am concerned. What on earth would people say if they knew that you and I were alone on the yacht—travelling together? Why it's a perfectly impossible situation."

"Don't worry about me," the girl said. "I shall

enjoy the trip. Why don't you stop troubling over what people will say?"

. "But I hate to be made a party to your being compromised," Hugh remonstrated.

"Forget it, my dear," replied Eunice. "Now, Mr. Deputy President, when do we sail? Can we have a prow round the town first?"

"You're a wonderful sport, Miss de Laine," said Hugh laughing, "and I'll promise to say no more—but under protest."

"Good," Eunice replied. "but what about a prow round?"

"I'm afraid we'd better not," Hugh said, remembering his recent experience ashore. "I'll tell you why," and he proceeded to give her an account of his recent experiences.

"You know you must have run a pretty serious risk," the girl commented gravely, when Hugh had finished. "I quite agree, you mustn't dream of going ashore again. Let's push off at once. I shall feel safer when we are a few miles away."

Having given the requisite orders, the yacht was soon under way, for she had been continuously under steam, and in a very little while the old-fashioned, picturesque port faded below the horizon as the yacht steamed in the direction of Malta where the captain proposed to re-bunker, before proceeding to Alexandria.

Very pleasantly the time passed, and only anxious thoughts for the welfare of Sylvia Peyton disturbed Hugh. With the passage of the days his anxiety increased, and several times he determined to broach the subject to Eunice, but was deterred from doing so by Sylvia's definite warning to him against this girl.

He felt sure that Sylvia was wrong there, but that he must respect her wishes. By the time the yacht reached Malta, Eunice and he had formed a very close friendship. At her suggestion he called her by her Christian name, and she called him Hugh. Several times when they had been sitting in their deck-chairs, in the glorious sunlight, watching the tiny coasting craft with brown sails skim over the water, or occasionally watching the passing of a graceful P. & O. liner, she had seemed on the point of telling him her history, but always stopped short and suddenly changed the subject.

Now they were approaching Malta, and as the vessel proceeded slowly up the old harbour, a Customs boat put off and signalled the captain to stop. This he did, and the launch drew alongside. A companion-way was let down, and two Customs officers, followed by a burly figure in plain-clothes, appeared on deck.

Eunice gave a quick intake of breath, and Hugh turned to recognise the big, burly figure of Chief Inspector Overtley of Scotland Yard.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

OVERTLEY RAMPANT

HUGH VALENTROYD was dumbfounded to see the big, unwieldy figure of the Scotland Yard official before him, and the latter obviously enjoyed Hugh's discomfiture, for, smiling, he observed:

"I daresay I am the last person you expected to see, Mr. Valentroyd." Hugh, who loathed the self-satisfied smile, and detested the man, replied:

"I don't think anything would surprise me that you said or did, judging by the amazing questions you addressed to me when we last met."

"Hum," said Inspector Overtley, frowning. "Well, I've just got one or two questions to ask you now, Mr. Valentroyd—and the ladies," he added, with a glance at Eunice, who had quite recovered her composure, and was standing, apparently unconcerned by Hugh's side watching the activity in the harbour.

"I see," said Hugh. "You had better come into the saloon for a few minutes. I shall not be long, Eunice," he added, addressing the girl, who smiled and nodded.

"Just a second," said the inspector. "Before we go, I want you to understand that no one must leave the ship for a few minutes—until I decide whether I want to see them or not."

"Really," replied Hugh, "this is too much, inspector. Have you a warrant for this extraordinary interference

with the movements and liberties of an ordinary British citizen?"

"No," frankly replied the official. "I haven't, but this is a British possession, and I have already arranged, before coming aboard, to get all the support I need from the authorities here. An interview is always preferable to 'Arrest on Suspicion,' Mr. Valentroyd, though the latter is more convenient to the police."

"Very well," said Hugh; then, turning to the captain, he remarked:

"Captain Hamer, this man is a police official. He may wish to interview members of the crew. What on earth for I don't know, but in the meantime he insists that no one leave the yacht. Will you see to that?"

"Very good, sir," briefly returned the captain, who saluted, and Hugh led the way to the saloon, followed by Chief Inspector Overtley.

When they were seated, Hugh waited for the inspector to begin, and after a short pause, during which he consulted a thick pocket-book, the latter asked:

"I think it would save time if Miss Sylvia Peyton was present at this interview. Would you mind sending for her, Mr. Valentroyd?"

"She's not here," Hugh replied in genuine surprise.

"Are you quite sure, Mr. Valentroyd?"

"Quite."

"Then where have you dropped her? Leghorn? The yacht visited Leghorn, didn't it?" The inspector had closed his book and was fixing Hugh with his keen little eyes.

"The yacht called at Leghorn certainly," Hugh replied, "but Miss Peyton has not been aboard the yacht at all."

"Oh! yes, she has," the Inspector asserted. "She joined the yacht at Marseilles. We have proof of that."

"I'm quite sure you're wrong," Hugh replied. "I have been on the yacht since it left Marseilles, and Sylvia Peyton has not been aboard at all. I have not seen or heard of her."

"Now, Mr. Valentroyd, I've carefully gone into your family and antecedents, and I tell you straight I'm sorry for you. You've got yourself mixed up with a rum gang, I can tell you, and if you're not very careful you're going to drop. Now, I'll be perfectly straight with you and you must be straight with me. If you assist me now, I'll guarantee that you'll come through pretty easily, when the crash comes. Now, tell the truth, Mr. Valentroyd. To begin with, just tell me where Sylvia Peyton is at this moment."

"I don't doubt that you mean well, inspector," Hugh replied, not unmoved by the big man's obvious sincerity, "but I simply don't know anything of Sylvia Peyton's movements, nor do I know why she should be persecuted like this. I know nothing—nothing of her whereabouts."

"Now, that is absurd, Mr. Valentroyd." The inspector's voice rose and his manner became positively threatening as he continued: "When I tell you we can prove things—I'm not bluffing and I don't want you to try to bluff me either. Do you think I've been all my years at the Yard without becoming bomb proof to bluff?" He swallowed—almost choked in his indignation. "You, at your age, just starting with your queer companions, to try to bluff me—piece of infernal cheek I call it. Now, look here, Mr. Valentroyd—you've rejected the hand of kindness. Very good, I'm

not begging, it will not be extended again. It remains to be seen whether you've got enough sense left to get yourself off pretty lightly. Now, will you tell me where that girl is, or not?"

"Your remarks are simply meaningless to me," Hugh calmly replied. "Your veiled threats objectionable, and your repeated and utterly vain questions wearisome. For the last time I do not know where the girl is."

"Huh—'meaningless,' 'objectionable,' 'wearisome,' eh?" the inspector snorted with fury. His cheeks were livid as he denounced Hugh. "Look here, you'll remember those words some day and regret you uttered them. Do you hear? Listen to me! I've seen hundreds of gangs—hundreds in my time like the one you've joined, and the end of the whole lot is the same. Law wins, Mr. Valentroyd, not silly, adventure-mad young asses and old knaves. Now, you mark my words. You'll be pinched. You'll be inside as sure as fate! Nothing will stop that. I'd back my pension on it. Do you think we're absolutely up the pole at the Yard? Do you think I haven't traced your career from childhood until now? I tell you straight," the inspector was cooling down again now, "it makes me sick to see a young man like you, member of an old family, excellent war record, D.S.O., M.C. and everything, and a quarter of a million of the best, link himself up with a murdering gang of cut-throats, thieves, confidence men, and heaven knows what. Mr. Valentroyd, what is the reason—have they got the 'Black' on you or what?"

"What do you mean the 'Black' on me?" Hugh questioned.

"Are they blackmailing you?" the inspector explained.

"No one is blackmailing me," Hugh replied, "and I don't in the least know to whom you refer when you hint at my having joined a gang of cut-throats. I am not conscious of having done any such thing."

"Whose is this yacht?"

"I don't know why you should ask," replied Hugh, "but there's no secret about that. It belongs to Viscount Halmene. I think you'll find it's quite regularly registered."

"Of course," retorted the inspector. "I've already found that out. Don't I know that a few years ago Viscount Halmene was a bankrupt and utterly poverty-stricken peer—borrowed 'fivers' from his friends in the West End who were sorry for him? Then suddenly he appears on the scene rich, buys back his family estates. Says he made his money in South America. They all say that—when it isn't Australia. He mixes with the most extraordinary lot of crooks and suspects that I ever saw. We've had his place watched, and even on this yacht what do I see when I come aboard? A captain who did time for scuttling a pedigree cattle boat, a girl who did a drag—that means three months—at Holloway, for shop-lifting, a couple of the crew whose faces I seem to know, and who doubtless have 'records.' "

"Inspector Overtley, I don't believe you." Hugh was shaken, so confidently did the inspector speak.

"You don't believe me? You poor, young dupe—you don't believe me! I repeat, I am sorry for you. What don't you believe?"

"About Miss Eunice de Laine for one thing——"

"Bring her in, then, and see if she takes the trouble to deny it," interrupted Inspector Overtley.

"I would not subject her to such an indignity," re-

plied Hugh, "and I think if you have nothing further to say this interview had better end."

"Where is the girl—Sylvia Peyton?" doggedly the inspector repeated his first question, as he stood surveying Hugh with an expression of mixed bewilderment and contempt on his large face.

"I don't know, I repeat."

"Mr. Valentroyd, I'm going to seek power now to detain the ship for a search, but before I leave, I am going to make a final appeal to you. Would you—Mr. Valentroyd—you, with your good name and good record, condone, and even assist, cold-blooded, black-hearted murder? Murder for purposes of robbery?" The inspector was terribly in earnest.

"Certainly not," hotly replied Hugh. The inspector opened his pocket-book and extracted from it an envelope which he opened. Inside was a tiny lace handkerchief, and laying it carefully on the table before Hugh, he said:

"This handkerchief with the 'S.P.' monogram in the corner has been identified by laundry marks and trustworthy witnesses as being the property of Sylvia Peyton. Understand me, there is no doubt about it. Even the very scent is hers—an unusual sort of heather essence. Is that clear?"

"Well," said Hugh, "what of it?"

"This of it," the inspector said impressively. "When Mr. Marnington, the Regent Street jeweller, was found murdered in his own strong-room, he was clutching in one of his hands Sylvia Peyton's handkerchief—the handkerchief you see before you now."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Hugh in his utter horror. "You can't mean that."

"Only too true, sir," responded Overtley gravely.

"Now—the choice is before you. Will you help me to find her, or not?"

"I swear to you, Inspector Overtley, that I do not know where she is. She is certainly not here. But, in any case, there is some horrible mistake. Sylvia Peyton is absolutely incapable of taking a hand in such a terrible business." Hugh's mind was in a turmoil; suddenly he remembered the cuttings from the Press dealing with this murder and robbery which he had seen lying before the President. He remembered the air of mystery about Sylvia; above all, he remembered his oath. He determined that, in any event, he would always protect Sylvia. He would stand between her and any evil that might overtake her.

"I shall return presently," the inspector informed him. "Think well over what I have told you, and see if you don't come to the conclusion that the side of society is a safer and more honest side to fight on than the alternative."

Hugh followed the inspector on deck. He hoped the terror in his soul was not portrayed on his face. With a terrific effort he tried to keep his voice perfectly steady as he said:

"We are going to take in coal. You will find us either here or at the coal shoots."

"I'll find you all right," grimly replied the inspector as he clumsily descended the companion-way and entered the waiting launch. Hugh returned to the saloon, took out a whisky decanter and poured himself out a stiff peg. As he was drinking it, Eunice entered.

"What is it, Hugh?" the girl asked anxiously.

"Close the door and come here," Hugh replied, then when she had seated herself on a settee beside him, he said:

"The man who has just gone is an inspector of Scotland——"

"Oh, I know that—old Overtley—go on," Eunice interrupted.

"Well, he came here to find Sylvia Peyton, indeed, he seemed surprised she was not on the yacht. He practically told me I was a liar when I said I didn't know where she is. He has gone now to get a search warrant and intends to return to search the ship." Hugh looked so obviously shocked still that Eunice was puzzled.

"Well, let them search," she said. "They won't find her—she isn't here. Why do they want Sylvia?"

"Oh! it's simply incredible," Hugh said, "but you remember that Regent Street murder and robbery?"

"Yes," replied the girl.

"Well, it appears a handkerchief, which has been definitely identified as Sylvia's, was found in the dead man's hand."

"How perfectly awful!" Eunice declared. "I wonder how on earth it got there?"

"You see, they'll try to arrest her for murder." Hugh was quite beside himself with anxiety and terror, for Sylvia's sake. He rose from his seat and paced the room, his eyes wildly looking out to sea as if he expected the inspector to return at any minute.

Eunice poured out a stiff glass of whisky and held it out to him.

"Drink this, Hugh, and pull yourself together. She's in no more danger than a child at a Sunday School treat. What do you think the President will be doing while old Overtley performs his clumsy tricks?"

Hugh could not help being slightly steadied by the quiet confidence of Eunice, and he remembered how

Overtley had said that this beautiful girl, obviously of gentle birth, had been an inmate of a prison for shop-lifting.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that no member of our club is allowed to suffer. There are such things as well-proven alibis, and in the last resort there is the sudden collapse of traitors within and enemies without. Besides, in Sylvia's case, the whole thing is grotesque. She wouldn't be there. Sylvia would be utterly useless in a business of that sort. Don't worry; it'll be all right." Eunice lit a cigarette and looked the picture of unconcern.

"Do you think, Eunice, that any members of our club were concerned in that outrage?" Hugh asked anxiously. She blew a cloud of cigarette smoke before she answered. Then, gazing at him, her fine eyes rather narrowed, she said:

"I don't know, and in any case, why worry? That sort of thing is the work of men whose minds run in that direction—not for you or me. We are bound by an oath, and we must keep it. Death follows disobedience—invariably, and you and I don't want to die yet, do we? Let us mind our own business and be thankful we are not called upon to perform any of that sort of thing—the sort of thing the Hawk calls 'heavy stuff.'"

"But do you seriously suggest that the President would sanction such an outrage?"

"Oh, Hugh, I don't know—I don't think so," Eunice began with rather a hurried, almost frightened, manner as if the same thought had been in her own mind; then, with a short laugh, she continued more brightly, "and if he did, he would take precious good care that no one could bring it home to *him*. But, really, I think the murder would be an accident in that case, an

eleventh hour unforeseen necessity. The men would probably be instructed to take the old jeweller away or truss him up or something, and he would cut up rusty and have to be knocked on the head. I am sure that happened—that is if it had anything to do with the club at all, because you have seen that the methods of the Brick-Bat, in dealing with its victims, are much more refined and speedy.”

“It is all very terrible,” said Hugh. “I must go home immediately to see the President and endeavour to protect Sylvia. I wonder if I can get an aeroplane from Malta?”

“You will certainly do nothing of the sort,” quickly replied Eunice. “Will you never understand the nature of your oath? My dear man, you might just as well jump overboard.”

“But what can I do? I must do something?” Hugh asked in despair, realising the perfect truth of the girl’s words.

“The obvious thing is to use the code-book and send the President a cable. You’ve got a wireless, and a code—— Hello! here’s old Overtley back again.”

Inspector Overtley had returned, accompanied by two Maltese officers, and approaching Hugh, presented a document which gave him authority to search the yacht. Hugh called the captain, and, having explained the position to him, the latter put himself at the inspector’s disposal, and the search began. It was, of course, fruitless. In half-an-hour, after much picking and scratching and unnecessary upsetting of cabin and stores, Overtley stood on the deck, accompanied by his two Maltese collaborators, and drawing Hugh to one side, said:

"The girl's not here. Now, have you decided to treat me to your confidence, sir?"

"I have nothing to say at all," replied Hugh.

"Right," replied the inspector, "that's final. Very well, I suppose you're going to bunker now, eh? Well, we'll meet again. *Au revoir*."

Then as he walked down the deck, passing Eunice, he said: "Good-day, Miss Leslie, or—I beg your pardon—Miss de Laine now, isn't it? Funny old port this, eh? Those castles over there remind one a bit of Holloway, don't they?"

Eunice slightly raised her eyebrows but did not reply, and, as if brimming over with good humour, the inspector proceeded to the top of the companion-way where the captain was standing.

"Good-day, Captain Hamer," the inspector nodded genially to him. "Good, reliable crew you've got here—I recognise five of 'em. Nice sea-worthy ship, too—better than the old cattle-boat *Sky-Rocket*, isn't it? Mind you don't strike another uncharted rock and lose her," and, chuckling with delight over his parting shots, the inspector settled himself into the stern-sheets of the boat and was rowed back to the quay.

"I knew he was worrying his poor head over something from the moment he came aboard the last time," said Eunice, laughing. "He was thinking out his jokes. Not a bad output for half-an-hour's thinking on the part of old Overtley." Hugh felt so relieved that they were safely rid of the inspector that he joined in her laughter.

Immediately the yacht went to coal and, after sending a code message to the President, Hugh and Eunice went ashore to avoid the filth of the operation.

For hours they wandered over the old town, visiting some of the remarkable churches, and otherwise pleasantly killing the time of waiting till they could get aboard again.

By evening the yacht had taken in coal, and been thoroughly cleaned and moved back into the basin. Eunice and Hugh returned and dined together, as the boat set out on its voyage to Alexandria.

Late at night the cable so anxiously awaited came, and when it was decoded, read:

"Situation well in hand. No cause for least alarm, but Sylvia Peyton completely disappeared."

CHAPTER TWELVE

EUNICE TELLS THINGS

THE message of the President, telling as it did, of the disappearance of Sylvia, perplexed both Hugh and Eunice de Laine. The latter was not inclined to treat it very seriously, whilst Hugh thought it must be that Sylvia, fearing arrest, was vainly trying to hide somewhere, and would presently be brought to light by the police.

Together, the man and the girl paced the deck as the yacht cut swiftly through the smooth waters upon which a full moon shone its silvery light, making the white fittings of the super-structure of the vessel look ghostly and unreal.

"I have a presentiment that Sylvia is in great danger now," said Hugh. "The President, as he says, may have the situation well in hand, but even he, apparently, cannot account for her mysterious disappearance."

"Perhaps not," Eunice replied, "but he knows it isn't the first 'mysterious disappearance' on Sylvia's part."

"You mean she has done this before—disappeared before?"

"Yes," Eunice answered. "I say," she continued, changing the subject, "it's getting chilly, isn't it? Let's go inside."

Hugh noticed that it had indeed become cold, for a strong north-west breeze had sprung up. Neither

spoke again until they were comfortably ensconced before the fire in the saloon.

"Comfy this, isn't it?" said Eunice, curling herself up in a peculiar way she had in her large chair, and gazing into the fire. She reminded Hugh of some feline animal—a very beautiful one, and kinder in her ways, but still there certainly was something unquestionably feline in the supple, sinuous movement of this girl's graceful figure. There might be a hint of the cat in the large brown eyes, but, Hugh reflected, those eyes, now gazing into the fire so pensively, were much too honest, too beautiful to be anything but what they were—the eyes of a jolly, nice, and—yes, in spite of Inspector Overtley—a good girl.

"You were saying," Hugh opened the conversation again after a pause, "that Sylvia had disappeared before."

"Yes, several times," the girl replied without looking up, and it seemed clear to Hugh she was reluctant to talk about the matter further, but he pressed her.

"When, and in what circumstances, Eunice?"

She looked up, and searching him with a keen gaze, said slowly:

"I don't know that it would do you any good to know, and I only found out in part. I do not know the whole story, but I think on every occasion she disappeared to meet a man."

Hugh felt the colour dying from his face, and Eunice, who was watching keenly the effect of her words, frowned slightly and bit her lip. After a pause, he asked:

"A man? What sort of a man? You don't suggest a lover, do you?"

"My dear man, I have no reason to suggest anything

at all. I only know she has disappeared on several occasions. On each of these occasions she has been traced by the Hawk's agents, and twice I have been sent to get her back." Eunice lit a cigarette and smoked silently for several minutes, while Hugh digested this information. Then he said:

"You know I would not ask anything, Eunice, that might endanger you. But if you can safely tell me any more, I am terribly anxious to learn it."

"Hugh," the girl quietly replied, a half-quizzical, half-sad smile on her pretty lips. "You're in love with that little thing—I had almost said little chit."

"She is a very beautiful girl," Hugh countered. "Can you tell me anything more?"

"All right," said Eunice, "I'm sorry if anything I say upsets you, but since there is going to be no peace until I tell you—here goes. I have known Sylvia for three years. About two and a half years ago she caused a bit of a sensation by disappearing from this very yacht at San Sebastian. I was not there, but Mona Riden was, and the President instituted a search. The men, who combed every district of the town, finally found her in a sort of Catholic Sisters' Rescue house or something, and Mona was sent for to bring her back. She's a nice girl, Mona—you'd like her. Mona said it was an awful place—like a very hard convent, a penitentiary or something. Sylvia was glad to come back. Mona said also that at a corner of a street a tall, shabby man came running up, and would have spoken to Sylvia, but two men from the yacht here were quietly shadowing them, and they dealt with him.

"Now, the next time was about eighteen months ago," continued Eunice, "that was in 'Frisco, and I was there. We were all staying at the Palace Hotel, and one day

I saw Sylvia speaking to someone in the lounge—a tall man, shabby, but rather refined-looking, and, thinking he was some new importation of the President's, I took no notice, but I saw Sylvia distinctly give him some paper money, and thought no more of it until the next day when Sylvia had disappeared. She went like a streak of lightning. At breakfast she seemed jolly enough, and, half-an-hour afterwards, she had gone when I went to her room. The comb-out of 'Frisco began—all that day and all that night—I was really worried. Of course I told the President about the tall man, and then he told me of the man who had appeared in San Sebastian. He called the two sailors in who had acted before, and sent them off on the trail of the man they had handled roughly in San Sebastian. Sure enough they got him, trailed him to a Spanish lodging-house of a low-down order. But—give me a drink, Hugh.” The girl made a little grimace and shivered as she continued. “I was sent, and supported by the two sailors, I entered. Well, I went into the café of the house, and there, in shabby clothes, was Sylvia sitting beside the man. I went straight over to her and bade her come. The shabby man started to interfere, but one of my escorts gave him a tap that put him under the table. The inmates all seemed drunk. A fat old Spanish woman stood on the staircase, telling beads and calling on the saints, and then firing a terrific old-fashioned revolver indiscriminately into the mêlée, we got away, and Sylvia had an interview with the President which must have been rather uncomfortable for her, and she took it out of me. Accused me the next day of telling the Chief of her speaking to the man in the lounge. But if I hadn't, she would

have been left with that awful person, in that still more awful place. Don't you think I did right?"

"Of course you did," replied Hugh. "I think you're a very wonderful, brave girl, Eunice."

"Well, the last time was the day I met you." Hugh looked up in surprise.

"Did you think we met by accident?" the girl asked.

"Well, I've doubted it once or twice," said Hugh, "but I left it for you to tell me—if you cared to."

"Right, I'll clear up that mystery for you at once—only keep this dark from everyone—there might be an element of danger in this being talked of too much, because it concerns the President and the Hawk."

"Certainly. I wouldn't dream of divulging anything you say."

"Three days before I met you," continued Eunice, "Sylvia disappeared from the club, her rooms and everybody, just as if the ground had swallowed her up—and she was finally found in a sort of girls' lodging-house of a very poor order in Chapel Street, Paddington. A house kept by a terrible old woman—she slept her unfortunate guests six in a room on shake-downs for a shilling a night, payable in advance on the morning of each day, and locked the door on the tardy ones at eleven o'clock every night. Again I was sent, and again I found her. It was seven in the morning when I entered the place. Some of the girls were still in bed—some were dressing—all were talking. I just gave Sylvia a shake, got her up, and almost without a word she came with me, and although she had gone from us of her own volition, she really seemed glad to come back. I don't know, it's all a mystery to me, that part of it. In the taxi she told me she wanted to meet a man—a gentleman who had

treated her kindly the preceding night, at five o'clock at Piccadilly Tube Station. Of course I thought it was our late shabby friend again, and I told the President. He instructed me to go, make sure, and give a signal to some man if it was, because the two sailors who could have identified him were on this yacht, then at Marseilles. Well, of course, I kept the appointment, and found *you*. The instructions were, whoever it was, to bring him to the club so that he would be known again. I soon became convinced that Sylvia's story was perfectly true, and in turn convinced the President, who thought at first you were either in some degree responsible for Sylvia's former disappearance or the agent of some Foreign Power come to find out about his invention or whatever it is."

Hugh, who had listened to the girl's story with increasing wonder, was struggling in his mind to find a possible reason for these strange disappearances of Sylvia's.

"What can the reason be for this, Eunice?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know,—who can tell a woman's motives for anything? It may be an old flame of hers that she goes to see every now and then." As she spoke the last words, she laughed wickedly at Hugh, who looked pained but did not reply.

"Well, the hour advances," Eunice declared, rising and yawning. "You take my advice, forget all things that are disagreeable, get to bed and have a good sleep. Good-night, Hugh," and in a moment he was alone.

Long into the night he sat and thought over again and again the story Eunice had told him, and at last, baffled, he turned in, but not to sleep. He lay pitching

and tossing on his bed until the morning light began to filter through the drawn curtains. Then he dropped off into a sound sleep from which he did not waken until ten o'clock. Astonished at the time, he dressed quickly and joined Eunice on deck whilst his breakfast was preparing. The girl, who sensed he had had a bad night, had forbidden the steward to call him, and now advanced to meet him, smiling brightly, and holding a cable in her hand.

"I determined, whatever it contained, to let you have a good sleep out first," she said. "You've not been worrying about what I told you last night, have you, Hugh?"

"Oh, no, I'm all right, thanks," he replied, taking the cable, and accompanied by Eunice, he moved off to the saloon where breakfast was now awaiting him.

The cable, duly deciphered, ran:

"Press on full speed to Alexandria. Get to Shepherd's, Cairo, quickly as possible.—Your President."

"Something in the wind," said Eunice.

"We'll have to obey, whatever it is," replied Hugh, as he rang a bell and sent the steward who appeared for the captain. Hugh communicated his new instructions, and in a second Captain Hamer had acknowledged them and left the saloon to put them into effect. Soon the increase of speed was evident from the belching funnels, the mountain of water parted by the bows, and the long wake of churned water behind.

Upon arriving at Alexandria, Hugh and Eunice lost little time in proceeding to Cairo. The yacht was left under steam, as Hugh did not know if the President might require it immediately, and Captain Hamer was only allowing the crew short leave ashore, a few at a

time, until he received further orders. The crowds of native vendors at Cairo, taking Hugh and Eunice for a young honeymoon couple, lost no time in proffering such of their wares as is usual in such circumstances. Thus, when a grizzled, old, grey-bearded Arab, who had plied his wheedling trade for nearly seventy years, offered "the lady of grace and beauty" a Birmingham-made scarab, that had been blessed by a very holy man who had made the pilgrimage no less than twenty times, and told her that if she would wear the scarab, her young husband would ever stand by her side even as he was now, never looking on other maidens, be they even as the houris of paradise, she bought one instantly, paying a price that brought the old charlatan's blessings down on her like tropic rain, turned laughing eyes to Hugh, and pinned the charm to her dress.

Arrived at Shepherd's, they booked rooms, and Hugh inquired for the President. He had not yet arrived, but was hourly expected by air—his suite was booked.

Hugh sat in the lounge, waiting for him to come down, and glanced at a recent paper. Idly turning the pages over, his eyes fell on a picture that instantly made him catch his breath, for he was looking at the photograph of Sylvia Peyton. The picture was illustrating columns of type telling the story of the Regent Street murder all over again, and the account of the search by the police forces of Europe for this girl, whose description made mistake impossible. The police, practically all over the world, were searching everywhere for Sylvia Peyton in connection with a murder the particularly hideous brutality of which had made it of extra notoriety.

Hugh was reading the account over again, misery

depicted on every line of his face, sickening fear in his heart, when a cheery voice accosted him.

"Well, Valentroyd?"

Hugh looked up to find himself gazing into the urbane, benevolent face of the President, who stood before him, hand outstretched, and an expression of infinite self-satisfaction and general goodwill on his face.

Rising, Hugh took the outstretched hand, and murmured his greeting. The President, however, seeing his obvious distress, took him gently by the arm and piloted him to the extreme end of the lounge and, calling a waiter, ordered some brandy and coffee.

"Brandy, mind you, not fire-water," he adjured. "Now, Valentroyd, what in the name of all things is the matter?"

Silently Hugh handed him the paper, and the President glanced at it.

"What?" he thundered, "do you mean seriously to tell me that you are worried about that gibberish? Man, you make me sick. Listen to me and take this into your shattered wits. That girl—my girl—for she's for ever under my protection, is absolutely safe. Absolutely safe. Will you take that in? Even though at the moment I can't put my hand on her, she's still safe. If she was arrested I have even now at this moment twenty credible witnesses, half of them titled, some professional, one a Bishop, one a Harley Street specialist, who will go and swear a complete alibi. I have arranged all that. But never let me see you like this again. Whatever happens, in any event, the club is on top every time. You don't mean to say that old Paul Overtley has winded you, do you? Pooh!

man, pull yourself together with a glass of that—it seems less poisonous than I expected.”

The President had just sniffed carefully at the brandy decanter, and the Egyptian waiter in kaftan and fez, who, knowing this important guest of old, had been standing on tenter-hooks, now gave a grin of relief as the President silently approved the quality and poured Hugh out a glass. The magnetic, almost hypnotic personality of the President, had done its work. Hugh felt elated. Some of the terrific confidence and assurance of the man passed into him—it was infectious. With surprising suddenness, his outlook seemed to change, and everything took on a more rosy hue. The President was powerful beyond any man he had ever met, and he had spoken. Hugh felt reassured. The President noticed the change in him, for he said:

“That’s better; now don’t let yourself go again. Lean on me—I’ll fix anything that needs fixing.” Lighting a cigar he looked uneasily at Hugh, as he asked: “By the way, before we discuss the business—the important business in hand—are you in love with little Sylvia Peyton?”

“I, I——” stammered Hugh, “I like her certainly——”

“I see,” said the President, “you are. Well, there’s no accounting for taste. Eunice de Laine is worth a dozen of her. By Jove, if I were in your shoes—but that’s your business. Good luck to you in any case. Now, look here, there’s an American here, called Alfred K. Stokes, Room 467. He’s in now. Get to know him by some means. It’s four o’clock now. I must, understand, have him presented to me by seven o’clock tonight. If you want money—here’s some.”

The President handed a bundle of notes to Hugh. "Now, be off," he said, "never mind how you get the introduction—get it. Wait a second—surely not. Ha! Ha! Ha! here's our dear old friend Paul Overtley. Hey! Overtley. Overtley, come here, you old blood-bound. What have you been doing prowling and sniffing round my yacht?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A NIGHT ATTACK

CHIEF INSPECTOR OVERTLEY, who had been watching the President and Hugh from behind a pillar in the lounge, and had had to move as a family group of American tourists came charging down upon him, so that he was visible to Lord Halmene, gave a start of surprise when the latter addressed him. If he could, he would have moved away, but there was no help for it, he had been seen, and the strident, jocular voice of the President had been heard by everyone within hearing distance. Indeed, everyone was already turning round to see who it was shouting his loud greetings. Cursing inwardly, the inspector turned towards him.

"Good-day, Lord Halmene," he said, "I hope your lordship is well."

"Very well, thank you. Very well, indeed, my dear inspector, you know my friend Valentroyd here, don't you. What will you take to drink? There's some passable brandy here, but perhaps you would prefer whisky, eh?"

"Thank you very much, your lordship," said the inspector, feeling rather uncomfortable. "I'll just have a small tot of brandy."

"Good," rejoined the other. "Waiter!—another glass. Now answer me, my dear Overtley, what on earth were you doing messing about my yacht?"

"H'm," coughed the inspector. "I was anxious to interview Miss Sylvia Peyton, my lord."

"Miss Sylvia Peyton." The President looked the picture of astonished innocence. "And why should you expect to find her aboard the *Falcon*?"

"Well, your lordship," replied Overtley. "We had information that she boarded your yacht at Marseilles, and I naturally thought she would be still aboard at Malta."

"If she boarded my yacht at Marseilles, she did it without invitation, so far as I am concerned," replied the President, "but she would, of course, have been welcome—more than welcome whenever she came—What do you want with her, anyway?"

"I suppose Mr. Valentroyd has already told you," said Overtley, "in any case your lordship must have read the papers."

"I hardly ever read the papers," replied the President. "What did you want with her?"

"I see a paper lying before your lordship now," said Overtley feeling that he was at last scoring a point, "and it is opened at a page which gives the latest developments of the Regent Street murder case. Miss Peyton's photograph is there."

"Really," rejoined the President. "I must look at it," and he proceeded to read the paper carefully. "Oh, here it is. Great Scott! What? Sylvia Peyton's handkerchief? Extraordinary! Fancy that!" The President then relapsed into silence as he continued to read. Both Hugh and the inspector watched him closely. After a while he finished reading, and, looking up, said:

"But, of course, the implication is ridiculous—you must see that, Inspector Overtley. Here you appar-

ently have two men, obviously conspirators, who call at the jeweller Marnington's house, in the night. They bring him down to his shop, then murder him and rob him. What place is there for a woman in a transaction of that sort? What good would a woman do there? What is the date? Let me see. H'm! Let me have a look at my diary. Yes! Sylvia Peyton on that date was at a dinner and ball in Belverden Square, at which quite a large number of people were not only present but actually dancing at the time this horrible affair took place. I myself was. Dr. Fermin Tares was. The Bishop of Walsingham was—oh! any amount of quite reputable people were. The girl can prove an absolute alibi. You, Inspector Overtley, are surely not responsible for committing such a *bêtise* as to allow this stupid publicity, are you? I shall certainly recommend the girl to sue for damages."

As the President spoke, the inspector visibly wilted. Experienced as he was in meeting and dealing with all sorts and conditions of men, the President was something quite outside his orbit. In somewhat less confident tones, he rejoined:

"Well, there is the handkerchief, my lord, and I have a warrant for her arrest."

"Oh, execute it, my dear chap, make your arrest, but I can assure you—what you must know yourself, really. You are making a silly mistake. You will make yourself the laughing stock of Europe. Ah! Valentroyd, we are detaining you," he went on, turning to Hugh. "You said you wanted to see your American friend."

Thus dismissed, Hugh left, bewildered by the course of recent events, and a moment after he had departed, Inspector Overtley finished his drink and also went

away, leaving the President chuckling at his expense as a result of the encounter.

Hugh felt more than ever since he had heard the manner in which the President had tackled Overtley, that Sylvia was in safe hands. He could not help contrasting the manner in which he had felt at the mercy of the Scotland Yard inspector with the way in which this man had obviously made Overtley quail. Now he must find this American—Mr. Alfred K. Stokes. How on earth was he to do this? He made for the main staircase, and at the foot, met Eunice just coming down.

“Have you been waiting long?” she greeted him.

“No,” replied Hugh, “and in any case, I have had an interesting time. The President has arrived, and he laughs at all our worries about Sylvia. Not only that, but Chief Inspector Overtley is also here, and the President pulled him up, and chaffed him unmercifully.”

“Goodness!” exclaimed the astonished girl. “Things are happening now, in quick style, and no mistake. Of course Overtley flew over from Malta to watch us still.”

“Do you think so?” Hugh asked. Then, as he reflected a moment, he added: “I suppose it must be so. By the way, I want to make the acquaintance of an American staying here, Alfred K. Stokes, I am wondering how to do it?”

“Know him by sight?” asked the girl briskly.

“No,” replied Hugh.

“Then get to know him by sight—ask one of the staff to point him out and then follow him to the bar, get him alone and commence to talk about the weather, the laws of his country, a visit you intend paying there,

anything. Americans are awfully easy to get to know when they're travelling and just as conversational as we are at home."

The girl's practical mind, full of worldly wisdom, was a never-failing source of mild wonder to Hugh. They talked for some little time further, then separated, Hugh to pursue the quest of the rich American, and she to seek the President.

Hugh succeeded very easily. A page-boy pointed out Mr. Stokes, who made a bee-line from the lift to the American bar, and, by strolling in there after him, Hugh soon got into conversation with him. They exchanged cards, and within half-an-hour were chatting on the subject of tarpon-fishing on the Florida Coast, a subject that had always fascinated Hugh, who told his acquaintance he had not yet had an opportunity of following his desire to travel much, but he intended visiting Key West very soon. The American, who evidently was familiar with the place and an enthusiast for the sport, took a delight in explaining at great length to Hugh his own and his friend's experience. They were both engrossed, indeed, when the President walked through the bar, and Hugh gave a start of surprise when he felt a light tap on his shoulder and turned to see his amiable chief.

Quickly he performed the introduction, and the American, deeply gratified to meet an English Viscount, apparently rich and amiable, fell an easy victim to the President's charm. He invited both to dine with him, but the President insisted on the American joining him and Hugh, "and my ward, Miss Delane." The American was delighted, and presently they all separated to dress for dinner.

The dinner was a success. It would be banal to

say that the President was a good host—he positively sparkled—he was brilliant. Eunice was charming, and Hugh, who had felt so relieved earlier in the evening when his chief had talked to him, now felt positively optimistic. Very gracefully Eunice withdrew at the port stage and left the three together, and it was a very happy American who finally left the President's suite after midnight full of good old brandy, full of enthusiasm for his new friend the amiable English Peer, and in receipt of an invitation to take a cruise on the *Falcon*—an invitation which he willingly accepted. He had crossed the first-floor landing and was about to step into the elevator, when a big, burly figure accosted him. Alfred K. Stokes took a dislike to him at sight. His dinner-jacket had been made when he was less stout, and he had rather a domineering manner.

“Mr. Stokes,” he began. “Am I right, sir?”

“That’s my name all right,” the American answered.

“Well, I’m a police-officer, Chief Inspector Overtley of Scotland Yard, and I just want to warn you of the danger of picking up promiscuous acquaintances in foreign hotels. That’s all I’ve got to say, sir.”

“But wait a minute—not so fast,” rejoined the American as the inspector was moving off. “I like a few more facets to a diamond than one. Who are you getting at, anyway?”

“I’ve simply given you a warning, sir—that’s all. I felt it was my duty to give it you. I’m saying no more.”

“Look here!” burst out the indignant Alfred K. Stokes. “You’ll qualify that or withdraw it. Now, see here, I’ve met Lord Halmene—Viscount Halmene, and Mr. Hugh Valentroyd. What have you got up

against Lord Halmene—you mean he's a crook? Confidence man? No?" as the inspector shook his head. "Well, Mr. Hugh Valentroyd—is he a wrong 'un?"

"No," replied the inspector, "he belongs to a good family and he's certainly got money?"

"Then what is it you're talking about? I've met, two days ago, Major Clive, a member of the Sirdar's staff, is he a wrong 'un?"

"No, certainly not," replied the inspector. "I only give you the warning, sir—that's all, for your own good."

"Why hang it," the American almost shouted. "Get back on to your beat—keep the kids from ringing door-bells. I don't know what your wage-roll is, but you get it easy," and turning away, he left the outraged Overtley standing purple-faced and speechless.

In the meanwhile, in the President's comfortable sitting-room, Hugh was seated facing his host.

"Now that's gone like a shot, my lad, that young fellow is eating out of your hands already. You picked him up very nicely and he took to you. I could see that makes it much easier."

"What did you particularly want him for—if I may ask?" Hugh could not for the life of him understand why the President was so keen to get to know this American, and the events of the evening had afforded him no clue, for Lord Halmene had merely entertained him well and invited him for a cruise on the yacht.

"Well," said the President. "We'll see—I don't quite know exactly how valuable he may be to us, but you can take it from me, I'm pleased—very pleased. Now, I want to talk to you for a few minutes about something else. Read that." Hugh took the paper

which the other held out to him and read the paragraph marked in heavy blue pencil. It conveyed nothing much to him, except that the note of the Dictator of Latinia had been couched in such arrogant terms that the power to whom it was addressed had ordered a partial mobilisation and was consulting the Foreign Offices of France, England and America before replying.

Hugh handed it back with a puzzled look.

"Of course, the blighter means to make trouble—he's been on the point of war for several years," he said, "but how does this affect us? Was it something to do with this that was contained in the correspondence I took and brought back from Count Radicati?"

"Ha! Ha! I should just think it was," replied the President. "Without the letter you took to him, that note would have been written in a very different style. The Dictator knows the whole world is watching him with deep suspicion, and should he enter too hurriedly into an aggressive war, he would find an overwhelming coalition of powers ranged against him. Since he had my note he feels stronger!"

"You mean you are selling him something so valuable that he feels he could win, in the face of all that looks like being arrayed against him?" asked Hugh.

"Not quite that, my lad. Your logic is bad. A much better—much more precise definition of the relations between the Dictator and me would be:—The Dictator, having paid £50,000 on account for an invention of death that will mean victory to the side possessing it, and expecting its delivery upon completion of various small, but important details of purchase, feels himself strong enough to do a bit of real good crowing. I feel, in consequence, strong enough to tap

him for another £50,000 forthwith, and in a day or so I shall probably send you over again."

"I shall never forget my oath," replied Hugh, "but I must say this, if a question is to arise of saving my life by performing the oath, and at the same time selling an invention that is to deal death to British armies—for we may quite conceivably be against Latinia if this position develops—then I couldn't—save my life at that price."

Hugh saw the President's face change several times during his slowly spoken statement. From sheer surprise to utter contempt, then gradually it became almost normal, but still a little contemptuous as he spoke:

"You're a strange mixture of child-like innocence and real ability undeveloped, and you're loyal, Valentroyd, so I look over much, but your naïveté sometimes almost infuriates me—it implies such deadly insult. Have I ever told you anything that gives you the right to imply that I do not love and honour my King? Have I ever said anything from which you would reach the conclusion that I do not honour my countrymen? Their profiteers—I hate and tax——" The President's voice rose, and his manner became tremendous as he continued in strident tones: "Many of their laws are made for the alien usurer and dishonest labour-sweating, slave-driving employers, for cunning, thieving lawyers, and are made by just these men. These laws, I say, I abominate. I scorn them, and I have placed myself above them. All this because I have passed through the mill. I have experienced the deep humiliation of intense poverty. The utter injustice of some of our laws is astounding. They say there's one law for the rich and another for the poor—they lie! There's only

one—and it's for the rich. There's no law for the poor—they're outlaws."

Hugh could not help feeling that the President must have suffered greatly at some time in his life for his earnestness on this subject was obvious—his passion terrible to see. In a calmer voice he continued:

"Forgive me if I seem to go off the deep end a bit, Valentroyd, but your implied suggestion that I would be a party to sacrificing thousands—maybe millions of the lads of my own country in a war with that insufferable Dictator—bah! You make me ill when I think of it. No, Valentroyd, no. There is only one army that will eventually get my invention, and that is the British Army. Only one ruler shall have that power—and that is our own King—God bless him. Not a dictator, who rules by the judicious administration of large doses of castor oil. The Dictator has paid fifty thousand pounds—he will pay another fifty thousand, and perhaps still another, for nothing at all. Nothing at all."

A malicious grin spread over the President's face as he finished. Hugh noticed, though, that his hand trembled slightly as he struck a match to light another cigar, for his had gone out while he spoke.

Hugh, who felt that he had been a party to a mendacious fraud to obtain £50,000 and was about to be a party to a further fraud to do exactly the same thing again, and who could not take the same view of these matters that the President did, felt he must protest.

"But this is fraud all the same, Mr. President," he said. "However you seek to explain it, the fact remains we have robbed the Dictator."

"Robbed the Dictator," scornfully repeated the President. "Say, beat him, lad, beat him. His régime

was a colossal bluff in its inception—he keeps it going by bluff, he's so used to succeeding by bluff that he thinks he's impregnable. This time he's out-bluffed, that's all, and he'll be more out-bluffed yet. Now, you go to bed and get a good sleep. We'll meet at breakfast. Nine o'clock do? Right. Good-night."

Hugh departed, after bidding his chief good-night, and lay awake a long time thinking over the events of the evening. What was to be the end of this association? What did the President intend to do with the rich American? There was simply no solution to his problem. Death was instant, and certain as Nemesis, for those who disobeyed or betrayed. Only one thing comforted him, and that was that the President was quite certain Sylvia was all right. After a while sleep came, and Hugh remembered nothing more until he was awakened by a slight sound and sensed rather than saw someone in his room. Hugh was not a coward in the face of physical danger. He lay silent for a second to make quite sure. Yes, there it was again—a slight movement—then a light from a torch directed on his open dressing-case. Instantly he switched the light on, and in a flash was out of bed, gripping a startled slim man of about average height. The man struggled silently, and only the sharp gasps for breath told of his terrific effort to get free. By a sudden sharp movement the intruder freed his right hand, and the next second produced a revolver from his pocket. Hugh grabbed his wrist and just managed to turn it as he fired—the bullet breaking some crockery. Again the revolver was discharged, and still Hugh held on. Soon there came a knocking at the door. "Come in, break the door," Hugh shouted, and his

assailant's struggles became intensified. Followed by heavy bangings the door gave, and a fireman and night-porter, accompanied by a startled maid, came into the room.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AN "ARABIAN NIGHT"

THE hotel servants entered Hugh Valentroyd's room, and at once seized the man with whom he was struggling.

"Let me go! Let me go!" he yelled, but though he struggled hard the men held on, and soon he became quiet. Hugh had now, for the first time, an opportunity of seeing his face, and he looked at him curiously. He had singularly clear-cut features and good eyes of a grey colour. His close-clipped military mustache and general bearing betokened some army experience. Hugh said to the fireman:

"Shall I telephone for the police?"

"If you like, sir," the man replied, still carefully holding his prisoner.

Hugh took the telephone and was soon in communication with the police authorities, to whom he explained what had happened. It was then that the captive spoke for the first time.

"Of course you're entitled to send for the police," he said, "but you will find nothing doing—I'm no burglar."

The man's accents were cultured—obviously he was English, and probably the product of a public school. Hugh thought what an extraordinary thing it was for such a man to be caught in the act of committing a burglary in Cairo. Then he reflected that all the

up-to-date burglars were men who never looked like what they were, and his heart hardened.

"That is a subject for you to discuss with the magistrate," he replied coldly.

The man did not speak again, and in ten minutes the police arrived and took him into custody. Valentroyd explained the matter fully to the chief officer present, and then, having given an assurance to attend the police officer later in the day, he dismissed the officer and returned to his bed. Promptly at nine o'clock, he was in his place at the breakfast-table, and very shortly afterwards the President appeared accompanied by Eunice de Laine, with whom he had been walking for a few minutes in the town. Both listened with interest to Hugh's story.

"Humph—queer business that, Valentroyd my boy," the President said slowly. "Of course it has something to do with your visit to our Latinian friend. I can't tell yet, but I'll soon find out. I'll take a run down with you to the police station when you go."

"But how perfectly dreadful." Eunice, who had shown real anxiety and had listened closely, without interruption, now spoke for the first time. "He might have killed you with that revolver."

"I confess I was a bit taken aback when he produced that," said Hugh, "but the only thing was to stick to him. He never got a chance to shoot straight, or, by the look of him, I think he certainly would have done so."

"If he is what I fancy," the President said, "he won't defend himself. Governments pay, but never protect their agents. Ha! ha! my dear chap, how are *you* this morning? Pull your chair up and join us here—there's plenty of room." The last words were ad-

dressed to the young American, who had just appeared. He greeted them cordially, thanked the President for his invitation, and sat down.

"Our friend Valentroyd has had an alarming experience during the night," went on the President, and proceeded to tell the American the story of Hugh's adventure. The breakfast passed very pleasantly, and later Hugh and the President left Eunice and the American together and proceeded to the Police Headquarters.

Before Hugh signed the charge-sheet, the President expressed a wish to see the prisoner, and the officer in charge of the police station, with due deference to a visitor of his rank, immediately acquiesced. As soon as the man was brought out, Hugh recognised his assailant and saw at the same time a look of recognition pass between him and the President, but the latter gave no sign to those about him of the recognition, nor did the prisoner claim the other's acquaintance. By a quick nod, the latter indicated that he was satisfied, and the man, who had given his name as John Smith, was immediately removed.

"I suppose I must charge him?" Hugh asked the President.

"Certainly, my boy, certainly! Every time! Can't have people going about breaking into other people's bedrooms, can we, Chief?"

"Certainly not, your lordship," replied the servile Chief of Police, quickly taking his cue from the President's apparent wish for a stiff prosecution, "and it will be a heavy charge, your lordship. Attempted murder. No less."

"Of course," said the President to Hugh, when they had left the building and were driving back to the hotel.

"As a matter of fact, you won't be able to prosecute him at all, for the simple reason that you won't be here. I want to get away to-day, and I want to take that young Yankee with us. I know that man—I suppose you are surprised to hear that?"

"Not exactly," replied Hugh. "I thought I saw you recognise him and he you, even though neither of you spoke."

"Quite right—well he used to be in the British Army—bit of a scallywag, I think. Humphries is his right name and he's a born soldier. He's now in the employ of a foreign power and is evidently hot on the scent of our little gadget."

"Is he employed by Latinia?" asked Hugh, greatly interested.

"Good heavens, no!" laughed the President, "his crowd are the absolute antithesis to our dear Dictator. Ha! ha! ha! he represents the opposition with a vengeance. When we've had another cut at our Latinian Idol, you and I are going—at long distance, mind you—to see about selling it in that quarter."

"Well, will they release this spy when I don't turn up?" asked Hugh.

"Oh, no," quickly replied the President. "You will make an appearance before a magistrate this morning, then I'll have a quiet word with our friend of the Police Department, whom I fancy is amenable to reason, and the two men who entered the bedroom and the maid can all say a certain amount. Whatever happens he will be kept locked up for a few weeks, and for that length of time he's better out of our way. By the way, keep very close with young Stokes. I'll break the news to him now that we've got to get off to-day."

The President's arrangements were all completed

with the smoothness and regularity of clock-work. Hugh went down and interviewed the Senior Magistrate, who agreed to hear the case immediately, and then he gave his evidence, securing an adjournment.

The American was "tickled to death," to use his own expression, at the idea of a cruise and the abrupt departure pleased his national sense of hustle. The bill was paid, the luggage transferred rapidly to the train, and by two o'clock the party were aboard the *Falcon*.

"We will sail just after eight o'clock," announced the President rather to Hugh's surprise, for he expected from the apparent hurry that it was his chief's intention to sail immediately. The latter seemed to be waiting for something. He kept leaving the saloon and looking over the rail towards the shore, at intervals of about half-an-hour. At five o'clock a boat was seen approaching the yacht, and the President stood at the top of the companion-way as its passenger mounted the stairs. Then for several minutes he remained in conversation with the man who had come in the boat. The latter was a strange character. He was dressed in old-fashioned rusty black. His age might have been anything from forty to sixty. He had little beady black eyes and his hair was thin and long. He twirled his hat nervously in his hands as he spoke to the President. His message seemed to be important, for when the chief turned round after dismissing him, as the man shuffled down the steps to return to the boat, Hugh saw that a frown which seemed to indicate perplexity sat on the President's usually calm countenance.

The American, Eunice, and Hugh had been watching from a distance, and now the President rejoined them.

"I find it will be necessary for me to go ashore before we sail," he announced. "Valentroyd, you don't mind

accompanying me, do you? We will leave you two to entertain each other." He smiled genially again by now, as he addressed his last words to Eunice and Stokes.

Hugh accompanied the President ashore, and he noticed that in addition to the two sailors who usually manned the boat, another two sat in the fore part dressed in shore-going kit. Upon arrival at the quay, the President quickly mounted the steps, and, turning to Hugh, said:

"We're going into a rather rough quarter, but don't worry, you're safe enough. When the street narrows, or we have to walk through the crowd in single file, keep close behind me."

Hugh murmured his acquiescence, for conversation was already difficult. The President had dodged into a narrow side-street off the quay, and the narrow roadway was full of jostling humanity. Here and there were doorways let into the high walls. Occasionally a heavily-laden ass would push its way through the crowd, saddle-bags protruding, accompanied by a dirty-looking son of Islam, who shrieked his wares in a high monotone, interspersed with curses upon his ass, the people who got in his way, and those who refused his mysterious merchandise.

Through this crowded artery of the native quarter, the President unconcernedly pressed his way. He was utterly regardless of the appeals of the beggars for help—everybody seemed a beggar.

Deeper and deeper they plunged into the native quarter. Hugh judged that they must have been walking for a quarter of an hour, when the President stopped before a narrow black doorway in a high wall, and knocked.

The door was immediately opened by a tall negro, heavily armed with an old-fashioned Arab sword, and knives with ivory handles protruding from his girdle. The President was evidently known here, for the truculent fellow's demeanour completely changed when he saw who stood before him. He bowed deeply, and the President, closely followed by Hugh, passed him, and entered a courtyard. Across this, he quickly stepped, and knocked on another door, which again was opened, and the President and Valentroyd entered a dark passage. The servant who had admitted them carefully closed and barred the door, then led the way along the passage, dark save for the lantern he carried, until they reached some heavy curtains. These he parted, and immediately they were ushered into a room, dimly lit, that smelt a little of some perfume. Heavy rugs lined the walls and magnificent carpets covered the floors. The servant bade them be seated, then, with a low obeisance, he disappeared.

"Rum place this, Valentroyd, isn't it?" The President's amused tones seemed as if they came from another world. This magnificence, set in a sea of dirt, disease and poverty, was typically Eastern, Hugh thought. He had not time to reply before the curtains were pulled apart and an old man, venerable-looking and richly clad, stood before them. He wore the light robes of an Arab and his very dignity proclaimed his rank. On his hand he wore the great ring which was the mark of his headship of his tribe, and his queer turban bespoke his religion. Indeed, the name and fame of the Sheik Ibn-el-Said, who was also a Hadji, was known from Bagdad to the borders of Persia—from Alexandria to Algiers.

A genial light entered his fine eyes and his face lit up as he welcomed the President.

"My father," he said, stepping up to Lord Halmene and gravely kissing him. "Thy presence is a light indeed." Then noticing Hugh, and being formally introduced, he greeted him, and at once, though orthodox in his faith, dismissed the usual ceremonial washings which preceded food with him and his guests, and struck a gong.

Wines and fruits in abundance were brought by soft-footed servants and placed at the side of the cushions upon which the three squatted.

"And now, my father," gravely remarked the venerable old gentleman, "let us talk of the robbery of the infidels and the destruction of the oil wells of the unbelievers, whom Allah curse."

Quickly the President interposed in Arabic, and having spoken, the old gentleman, after a slight raising of his bushy eyebrows, nodded. The President turned to Hugh, and said:

"You don't mind, I know, if this conversation between my old friend and me proceeds in Arabic, do you? He speaks more fluently in that tongue, and we have to discuss a great many details that would be hard to translate."

"Not a bit," said Hugh, who was not so innocent as to take the remark at face value. The piquant opening of the old Sheik had greatly intrigued him, and he was a little disappointed that he was not to hear more.

"That's right," rejoined the President—"you'll find these cigarettes of Ibn's excellent."

"Not so, my father, not so. It is not meet that the young man should sit under my roof hearing a tongue

he does not understand. He shall be amused. Come, my son."

Hugh followed the venerable old man up a staircase, the entrance to which was covered by a curtain, and through some curtains again at the top, into a large room, similar to the one he had left. Here the Sheik Ibn-el-Said seated him on a divan, then he said:

"The language in which the maidens sing may be foreign to thy comprehension, my son. But the songs they sing are songs of Love, and Allah has ordered that Love can be understood in all languages. Nevertheless, there is one that hath the French tongue. I brought her from Tunis last Ramadan."

Again Hugh was brought large trays of confections, cigarettes and wine. Immediately after the old man had gone, the curtains were dramatically parted at the further side of the room from where he sat, and a tall Arab girl appeared. Native tambourine in hand, she took a quick glance round, then fixing Hugh with a smile, she bowed low in token of her humility in the presence of the sex she had been taught was so superior, and to the strain of hidden harps and pipes, she danced a dance of the desert. Sometimes the movement was slow, the music sad, then again it became hectic in its terrific passion, and the girl's movements were so swift that it was almost impossible for the eye to follow them.

She withdrew, and Hugh could only murmur his thanks to an empty room. Two girls came next and sang a duet, a song that may be heard sung by those dancers the Ouled Nails in any native café from Persia to Morocco. They crooned the simple measure, and Hugh liked the soft-toned hidden accompaniment. Various other girls—all much made-up—came and sang, and last of all a tall girl, typically French, with

big bold eyes and a saucy smile, came in and, seeing no one present but Hugh, indulged her native propensity for flirting by making eyes at him, and throwing a series of languishing glances that made Valentroyd feel intensely uncomfortable and embarrassed as she sang snatches from "Chanticleer" and "Madame Angot," and other bright French operettes. Hugh did not know whether he would be doing right if he spoke to her, but he was saved by the entrance of the President and his host.

"Hullo," said the President. "This girl is a new one, Ibn, isn't she? Ah, my friend, you're beginning to fall from grace—this is no daughter of the Prophet, she looks like a daughter of Jezebel to me."

"Not so, my father," gravely responded the Sheik. "My harem was ever the refuge of the fair in distress from every country of the earth, and by Allah's grace, ever will be. This child is not very popular with her fellows, I am told,—nevertheless, she is a great comfort to me, and shall remain."

Hugh, who was deeply amused, had difficulty in keeping a straight face, but he succeeded, and after some further general conversation, the President and he left, and again the congested streets were passed and they returned to the yacht.

Immediately, almost, she was under way, and the cruise had begun. Dinner was a very pleasant meal that night, and afterwards Eunice sang a couple of songs, and as Hugh listened to her strong, deep contralto voice, he could not help contrasting the beauty of this girl in her refined and cultured setting with the other type of beauty he had seen in the Alexandrian mansion of the old Sheik. For a while, when Eunice

had finished singing, they talked, then, when she had retired, the President said:

"Well, what about a rubber of Bridge?—Oh! damn it! I should have spoken while Eunice was here, but although she makes a four up I don't like playing with women at cards much."

"We could play poker," volunteered Alfred K. Stokes.

"Ah! so we could—happy idea that," said the President, crossing the room to a cabinet and taking from it several packs of cards. "How shall we play?"

"I don't mind one bit," said Stokes. "Just make your own pace."

"Well, just to see how we get on," said the President, opening a couple of packets, "what about two pounds, four pounds, six pounds—no limit, but Jack of Aces and two pounds each in the Kitty?"

"Good—that's nice and brisk," said Stokes, and Hugh, who thought the play was somewhat high, felt he ought to agree.

Alfred K. Stokes was a good poker player—there was not the slightest doubt about that. He bluffed Hugh out time and time again. Indeed by midnight he was winning over a thousand pounds. The President remained quite urbane; there was no trace of irritation in his manner, and his play was steady and consistent to the limit of his cards. He watched Stokes' face more closely than he watched the cards. Then a change came. The American, after a long run of winning hands, had a "run" and backed it up. Hugh had "threes" and dropped out of the betting at fifty pounds. The President went on—so did the American. The end was that, after a little reckoning, the American was shown to owe the President four thousand pounds.

"Well, now, I hate winning money from my guests," the President said.

"But that's all right," interrupted Stokes.

"Wait a minute," rejoined the President, draining his whisky glass. "I'll play one hand if you like—one only—double or quits, eh?"

"Splendid—good sportsman," said the American, and the cards were dealt again.

This time the betting was not brisk. The American had "three of a kind" but small. The President had a small "run" which easily won, and the American went to bed eight thousand pounds worse off than he was before he sat down to play poker with his host.

"Now, Valentroyd," the President beckoned Hugh into a chair. "If you are not too tired, I want you to listen to me for a few minutes."

"I am perfectly fresh, thanks," said Hugh, "and in any case, I want to arrange to pay you the money I owe you for cards to-night."

"Pah!" said the President contemptuously, "you don't owe me a sou—Don't have me go into it. Just take it tactfully. *You don't owe me a sou!* Now, you will be interested to know that as a result of my visit to our old friend Ibn-el-Said, I have an adventure in store for you that might be a page torn out of the 'Arabian Nights.' I took you there for Ibn to approve of—and he did—how——"

But here the President was interrupted. The second officer, after knocking hurriedly, entered the saloon.

"There's a police-boat, or a destroyer, or something lying off the starboard, sir, and ordering us to lie to. She's sending a party aboard," he announced.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AN OCEAN SEARCH

“A POLICE-BOAT—or a destroyer?” repeated the President. “What can this manifestation be, I wonder? I rather think it may be our old friend Overtley again, but if it’s any member of the Secret Service department of any country hunting my gadgets they’ll get a shock.”

Having spoken, he walked over to a small safe which he always kept locked. Having turned the combination and produced a small key from his pocket, he opened the door and took from the safe a small instrument rather like a folding camera. This he glanced at and slipped into his pocket.

“Come on, Valentroyd,” he said, moving towards the saloon door. “We’ll see what’s coming off.”

Hugh could see the lights of the vessel close in to the side of the yacht, slowing down in speed as the *Falcon* did the same. In a moment both vessels had stopped and the stranger had lowered a boat, which swiftly crossed over. Anxiously the President looked down the slips as three figures left the boat and climbed the steps.

The first was Overtley, and, as he recognised him, Hugh thought he heard a sigh of relief emanate from the President, who jovially greeted the stout inspector.

“Well! Well! Well!” he exclaimed. “Wonders will never cease; if it isn’t our dear old friend Overtley.

Now what are you after this time? Don't, oh don't tell me you're still searching for your little Sylvia Peyton, who goes about murdering great big men in the middle of the night in Regent Street, when she's really somewhere else."

"From information received, my lord, we believe Sylvia Peyton to be aboard this vessel, and it is my duty, begging your lordship's pardon, to institute a search for her. Here is my authority." The inspector fumbled at some papers, but the President stopped him.

"I don't want to see that thing—whatever it is—search away, my good chap—search away. Only in your future searches do please time it a little better. Two o'clock in the morning—What?"

"I beg your pardon, my lord, but it is only just now we got near you," replied the inspector.

"Tut! Tut! Overtley. Why beat about the bush with me? You came now because you thought you would catch us off our guard. You must be careful, that's all. Miss Eunice de Laine is in bed. Give her a few minutes to dress. You know, in spite of my deep regard for you, Overtley, you are a bit of a nuisance. Get on with your search now, and then come and have a drink in the saloon.—Oh, Hamer, this is the inspector back once more," for the captain had just appeared, "he wants a look round the ship again—see to him."

While Overtley prepared for his surprise search, the President and Hugh went and sat down in the saloon, and instead of reverting to the subject he had been previously discussing, the chief entertained Hugh with a learned disquisition on the history of ancient Egypt. Though inclined to be amused at first, Hugh, to his surprise, found himself becoming intensely interested in the narrative. The President had the gift of lucid

explanation, and his story of the old civilisation of three thousand years ago was told as a romantic and engrossing tale, and clearly showed a breadth of learning on the part of the man that Hugh had not given him credit for. The epic story of the Assyrian War had been reached, when a tap came at the door and the crestfallen inspector returned to apologise again, and announce his departure.

"Never mind, old chap," said the President encouragingly. "You can't expect to find every suspicion justified, you know. That's the worst of being so cussedly suspicious. You sometimes get disappointed. Whisky, brandy or port? And what will the sleuth-hound pups, or assistant sleuths, or whatever you call them, take?" The President had rung, and the night steward immediately appeared.

"Give this gentleman's two assistant disturbers of the peace what they like," his master ordered. "Now, inspector?"

"Thank you—just a little nip of whisky, my lord!"

"There you are," said Lord Halmene, as he poured out a stiff tot and handed it to the inspector. "Valentroyd and I will also fill up and drink to your success. How shall we put it? Here's to Chief Inspector Overtley—may his shadow never decrease and may his quest of Sylvia Peyton, the villainous little murderess, have a happy ending! Will that do?"

"I drink to your good health, my lord," said the inspector, who felt uncomfortable under the malicious chaffing of the President.

Then, as he emptied his glass, he said:

"Thank you very much, my lord. We must get away now, but I want to make it clear that I myself do not think Sylvia Peyton did the actual deed. What

I say is that she has knowledge that would be invaluable to the police in finding the actual culprits."

"Ah, I see—distinction with a difference, eh? Well, good luck to you, anyway! Have another drink before you go? No? All right. Good-night, inspector."

When the inspector and his assistants had departed, the President turned to Hugh, and said, "Now, Valentroyd, after these interruptions I have something of importance to say to you. I told you that I was going to put you in the way of an adventure, the romantic character of which is reminiscent of the 'Arabian Nights.' Now the objectives of this adventure I am not disposed to discuss with you at present; partly because you are still such a 'Law and Order' merchant, if you'll pardon my slang; partly because the actual objectives may vary slightly, according to circumstances. Now you possess a knowledge of staff-work. You were on the staff in the War. You also had a knowledge of regimental work and engineering, hadn't you?"

"Well, yes," said Hugh. "I was in the Guards, then I went on the staff of the Engineers—explosives I was concerned with, because I rather specialised in chemistry in my Oxford days, then I was for a while at G.H.Q."

"Excellent," replied Lord Halmene, lighting a fresh cigar. "I've got a bit more to say to you yet. That is, if you're not too tired?"

"Thanks," Hugh replied, "I'm not a bit tired. Carry on by all means."

"Now I'm not going to hide from you the fact," went on the President, "that in the end somebody's going to get a nasty knock. It's not going to be us, but it's going to be a low-down Greek, who has started more than one war in his day—he's an armament manu-

facturer amongst other things, and possesses a perfect genius for selling his weapons of death. Now in various oil enterprises this rascal has ruined hundreds of your fellow-countrymen. He ruined my late father."

The President smoked reflectively for a few minutes, then continued, "Now the Sheik Ibn-el-Said is another man that this Greek Jew had a cut at, and I must say he rattled old Ibn as he was never rattled before. Our old friend Ibn possesses great cunning, and I would have backed him to win in any battle of wits, but Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos—for that's the name our Greek beauty rejoices in—simply made rings round him.

"You must understand that Ibn is an hereditary Sheik of a tribe that for countless generations have moved about on the borders of Persia and in the high country above Mosul. Now that country is reputed to be rich in oil, and M.K.P.—his name is as awkward to say as he is to handle—got to know of certain parts under Ibn's rule that were particularly juicy. He approached Ibn for concessions, but that old bird has a very peculiar sense of honour. He had, and his forbears had, lived all their lives in comparative luxury, by their ability to make lightning raids on caravans and less well-armed tribes. A little murder and other forms of violence are quite '*de rigueur*' in Ibn's country. But he never broke his pledged word in his life. He had promised the concessions to an English company, had accepted a deposit and given his hand, and there the matter ended. But it did not end with M.K.P. When, after the War, all that country was in a seething state, the wily Greek arranged for the intervention of a powerful Emir, who was pretty unscrupulous but in good favour in high quarters, to come and kick up a dust with poor old Ibn, who went of course like chaff

before the gale. The Emir's case was acceptable in high quarters, because he had had sense to fight on our side during the War, and our people sanctioned his grip on that territory. Of course the oil wells passed into the hands of the Greek snake, and he and his Emir friend share the plunder. What do you think of that now?"

"I think it's perfectly disgraceful, of course," said Hugh indignantly. "The fine old chap was penalised for sticking to his bond."

"Exactly," said the President. "Well, now, you, my boy, are going to help the dear old Ibn to give the Greek one in the ribs."

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Hugh. "I don't mind admitting that my heart would be in that enterprise."

"Splendid," returned Lord Halmene. "Now what exactly is going to happen will be explained to you by the Sheik himself. This much I can tell you. An expedition has been arranged, and an armed force (of sorts) is even now mobilising at a place which Ibn-el-Said will tell you of. The expedition will be commanded in person by the Sheik Ibn-el-Said, and his chief of staff will be Hugh Valentroyd."

"Good heavens! Where is the expedition going? What is it to do?" Hugh burst out.

"I told you before I cannot answer every question about that," returned the President. "Your knowledge of armaments, equipment, explosives, tactics, fire control—everything is of vital importance. You will stand at the old man's right hand and direct, through him, and I shall have a representative there also who will be able to overcome any serious opposition in the last resort. Understand this. My belief is that, when you examine the plans, you will see that it is possible to accomplish everything without a shot being fired. On

the other hand, if you meet with serious opposition—well, I'll provide for that."

"It sounds like a page from a romance," said Hugh. "Entirely divorced from the prosaic twentieth century."

"Precisely," returned the President. "I told you the whole thing was like the 'Arabian Nights,' but you are wrong, my boy, when you say the twentieth century is prosaic. There is as much romance now as ever there was—if you look for it. My life could not be considered dull, and so far as the East is concerned—well, the same spirit governs men's hearts in the East to-day that ruled in the days of the greatness of that Ancient Egypt that we were yarning about when Overtley was searching the vessel. By the way, that's possibly a tribute to the Goddess of Romance on old Overtley's part. Searching a ship in the middle of the night for a girl on a murder charge—a girl who would scream the place down on the first semblance of violence. Ha! Ha! Ha!" and the President lapsed into one of his infectious fits of laughing, in which Hugh joined.

When the laughter had died away, the latter said: "On that point, President, the question of Sylvia Peyton, I confess I am very worried about her safety. The poor girl may be dead, for all we know, driven by their atrocious search for her, on such an abominable charge, to suicide."

The President rose, shook himself, then quietly addressed Hugh. "Valentroyd my boy, it's a bad thing to go to bed late with forebodings of evil and unreasonable and illogical imaginations of despair, when the alternative theory—the true one, that no news is good news, is available. There are special circumstances in Sylvia Peyton's case which make her present disappear-

ance not so unexpected and baffling as it would be if, say, Eunice de Laine disappeared. I am convinced she is all right. Don't worry any more about that. I feel sure we'll soon get to hear something. Now let's turn in. Good-night, old chap."

Hugh bade the President good-night, and for some time lay awake, turning over in his mind the remarkable events of the evening. Then he slept, and was awakened late in the morning by the chief himself, who came into his cabin.

"I've just had a bit of news," he said, "that I'm sure will interest you. Sylvia Peyton turned up in New York. She had some relief—rather a considerable sum of money—from one of our agents, and disappeared again. I have cabled instructions that she is to be found—and found quickly. Now that we know roughly where she is, we shan't be long in finding her."

"Oh, that's excellent news," said Hugh. "I am tremendously relieved to know that. What do you propose to do with her when she comes—or, rather, when your people over there find her?"

"Oh, hide her—keep her out of the way—that's easy enough," replied Lord Halmene. "By the way, I thought Stokes was just a trifle cool to me this morning. You might make yourself particularly agreeable to him to-day. Unless I'm very much mistaken he'll find an excuse to leave us before long."

"Really," Hugh said. "Why should he be cool?"

"Oh, I don't know," laughed the President, "perhaps his eight thousand seems a bit bigger in the morning than it did last night, and then it was a confoundingly awkward circumstance that old Overtley should have chosen that moment to come and turn the yacht

over—just when I'd taken eight thousand of the best off him."

"But I don't see that that has anything to do with it—the game was perfectly straight, wasn't it?"

Hugh looked up at the President, who was smiling rather quizzically as he replied: "Oh, bless my soul, yes! Straight enough for anything. Poker is essentially a game of wits, you know, and I won. Now I suppose you want to get up—see you later," and whistling a popular air from a Gilbert and Sullivan opera, this remarkable man, to whom Hugh had perforce sworn allegiance, left the cabin, and the young man proceeded to his tub, and dressed. He breakfasted alone, as the others had long since finished, then joined his three friends who were seated in deck chairs on the lee side of the deck.

The President was in the midst of a long and entertaining story of his experiences during a revolution in a South American country, but this was interrupted before the conclusion by a steward who brought a cable to him. It was a long one and, as usual, in code. Excusing himself, Lord Helmene retired to the saloon to decode it. As the air had got rather chilly, Eunice retired to her cabin for an additional wrap, and almost immediately Stokes changed the subject they had been discussing, and said abruptly to Hugh:

"Say, that was a bit swift last night—that policeman coming here looking for a girl, wasn't it?"

"It was indeed—very annoying," replied Hugh. "I suppose you were in bed, were you?"

"Sure I was," the American said with a glance round, apparently to see if anyone was coming. "See here, Valentroyd, why should he think the girl was on this yacht?"

"Really, I don't know," Hugh replied, rather uncomfortably, for he saw that there was more than a little suspicion in the American's face. "He knew, of course, that she was a friend of Lord Halmene's, and I suppose it is his duty to look for anyone he wants wherever he thinks he can find them."

"Yes, that's all right, but——"

The American was interrupted by Eunice, who returned at that moment and intimated to Hugh that Lord Halmene wanted him for a minute in the saloon, and he immediately slipped off.

The President looked up as he entered and invited him to sit down. "I've just received a cable which means we've got to rush like the deuce to London, Valentroyd," he said. "Briefly the position is this. Our Latinian friends are pressing for a completion of the transaction you opened so satisfactorily, and at the moment old Radicati is on his way to London to see me. Now I will not enter the negotiations at this stage at all. I want you to do exactly what I tell you, I can think of no one who would do it so well. We are going to rush now to Marseilles, and from there you and I will proceed by 'plane to Croydon, I have already wired for reservation. It is unfortunate, because I wanted you to go to meet Ibn-el-Said. I'll have to cable him that you will be with him in a day or so. By the way, have you had any talk alone with Stokes? Did he refer to last night?"

Hugh told him exactly what had taken place.

"Hum," slowly rejoined the President. "He's half tumbled to the fact that there is something funny afoot. Never mind, it can't be helped. Rejoin him, old chap. I shall be busy for some little time yet."

The day passed agreeably enough, and eleven o'clock

that night found Eunice again retired and the President, Hugh and Stokes again foregathering in the saloon.

"Well, Stokes my boy!" Lord Halmene said, "what about your revenge at Poker?"

"Wal," slowly drawled the American, "I think I'll give it a miss to-night, Lord Halmene. Tell us a tale instead, about your adventures with the Dagoes—it's more interesting."

The President gave him a quick glance, as he replied:

"As you will, my dear chap, as you will. Help yourself to whisky," and for the next hour or two he talked of the queer characters in South American politics, and then they all retired.

The next morning the President intimated to Stokes that at Marseilles he and Valentroyd would have to leave the yacht and would be absent for a couple of days, but that he was welcome to remain until their return, but, whilst thanking him, the American said he had decided to visit a few towns in the south of France, so upon arrival at Marseilles, they separated, Hugh and the President proceeding to London by air, and the American to continue his travels alone, and, temporarily, Eunice to remain on the yacht, which was ordered to stay at Marseilles pending further instructions.

Upon arrival in London, Hugh and his chief proceeded direct to the Brick-Bat Club, and Hugh sat in the large room which had such strange memories for him while the President went into the Hawk's nest, where he remained closeted with that sinister individual for a long while.

Eventually he came out, and, coming straight over to Hugh, said: "I want you to proceed immediately to the Latinian Embassy. Ask for Count Radicati—you are

expected—and tell him you will be in a position to continue the negotiations at ten o'clock to-morrow morning—just that. Then return here.”

Hugh went outside, and while he looked for a cab, a tall man accosted him.

“You are Mr. Hugh Valentroyd?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“We are police officers.” Hugh noticed there were two of them. “Will you accompany us to Scotland Yard immediately. Get a cab, Mawson,” the first added to his companion.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"PRESIDENTIAL" THUNDER

HUGH, astounded at being thus summarily invited to go to Scotland Yard, was for the moment deprived of the power to think clearly.

All the sinister facts about the Brick-Bat Club flashed through his mind, and he trembled inwardly. His own position was so hopelessly compromised. Only when the taxi, that one of the officers had summoned, had drawn up to the club, did he recover his power of action.

"What on earth are you talking about?" he laughed. "By what right do you summon me to come to Scotland Yard? How do I know you are police officers?"

The man who had just addressed him produced a certificate in card form, and while Hugh glanced at it, he was thinking rapidly. He must inform the President. How was he to do it?

"Well, look here," he said. "This seems to me all right, but I simply can't come down at this moment. I have a most important appointment to keep."

"I am afraid it will have to wait, sir," replied the inspector politely. "Believe me it is better for you to come along without protest and discuss the matter that Superintendent Bethume wishes you to see him about."

"Well, wait a moment in any case," said Hugh. "I

must let a friend of mine know I cannot keep an appointment that I am pledged to keep immediately,” and he made as if to re-enter the club.

At once a detaining hand was laid upon his arm.

“Without consulting anyone, please, Mr. Valentroyd,” the man spoke quietly, but all the elements of an order were in his voice.

“I see,” Hugh, whose first shock was giving way to annoyance, curtly spoke. “I am to understand myself under arrest.”

“Not arrest, sir,” replied the inspector, “but Superintendent Bethume particularly wants to see you, has done for some time, and you have been difficult to get hold of. They did not know your address at your house, and in a case like that it is customary to bring the person required along—it saves you the trouble that you would be caused by our obtaining court orders.”

“Very well,” Hugh replied a little acidly. “We’ll go into all that later. I suppose I have no option but to come,” and he stepped into the waiting cab. The officer who had first spoken to Hugh made one or two tentative attempts to start a conversation, but Valentroyd remained silent until the Yard was reached. There the officers conducted him to a lift and along a corridor on the third-floor to the room of Superintendent Bethume. One of them entered, and returning almost at once, addressed his colleague.

“Take him along to the waiting-room for a few minutes, will you?” and Hugh was conducted to a plainly-furnished waiting-room, where the other officer remained with him. Ten minutes passed, and Hugh’s irritation rose with the passing of time. Then the door opened, and the inspector who had entered his chief’s room, beckoned Valentroyd to follow him. Again they

approached the superintendent's room, and this time the door was immediately opened and Valentroyd found himself facing the renowned Superintendent Bethume.

"Sit down, Mr. Valentroyd," he said, and Hugh obeyed. He did not know whether or not he liked this tall, stiffly-built man, with the iron-grey hair and the keen eyes, whose jaw showed great strength of character but whose lips were very thin. "I have desired to see you for some days and have found it difficult. Your butler said you were away, he knew no more. Do you travel extensively, Mr. Valentroyd?"

"No." The monosyllabic answer seemed to surprise the superintendent for he altered his method of approach.

"My staff tell me you are a member of the Brick-Bat Club, and the comings and goings of various members of that remarkable institution are of profound interest to us in this building, as you doubtless understand." The superintendent paused for Hugh to comment, but he merely shook his head wearily, and said:

"I certainly do not. Please come to the point. My time is limited."

"Very well." The superintendent consulted some papers on his desk. "My report shows you to be a friend of Sylvia Peyton, to have been present at the deaths of Raymond Gaunt in the club building and the match-seller known by the sobriquet of Whining Willie in Poplar. You are also a friend or associate of Viscount Halmene, whose house is frequently resorted to by members of the club. During the last few days you were sailing with him in the Mediterranean, and you jointly won eight thousand pounds from a travelling American, called Stokes, at cards. You see my information is pretty up-to-date, Mr. Valentroyd."

“What on earth are you suggesting? Lord Halmene certainly won eight thousand pounds from Stokes. I was present, and the game—it was poker, was perfectly clean. Are you suggesting fraud?”

“No, no,” quickly denied the superintendent. “Not at present certainly. I was merely illustrating to you the accuracy and extent of our information. We get to know everything that matters in time, Mr. Valentroyd.”

“I congratulate you I’m sure,” said Hugh.

“Now, Mr. Valentroyd, I’m going to throw myself a little on your sense of good citizenship. We know you and all about you. We also know most of the habitués of the Brick-Bat Club, in quite another sense.

“I’m going to give you two pledges *now*. In the first place, if you will make a full and open statement of the whole extent of your knowledge *at once* in this office, I’ll guarantee no action shall be taken against you personally. In the second place, no murmur of a sentence of it shall leave this room. We will not drag you into it, but merely use it as a basis of inquiry. Now, sir—the choice is with you, take it.” Almost dramatically the superintendent waved his hand and sat back. Hugh, relieved that this was, after all, only a bluff to frighten and pump him, felt burning indignation.

“I have already said over, and over, and over again, that I know nothing,” he shouted, rising. “I shall consider what steps to take about my—practically it amounts to that—false arrest.”

Hugh took his hat and made for the door where the two officers were standing. The senior looked inquiringly at the superintendent, who had slightly raised his eyebrows, but he merely nodded, and the door was opened. The inspector silently accompanied him to the

lift, and in two minutes, Hugh was in Whitehall, taking a taxi for the Latinian Embassy.

Here he was almost immediately shown into a drawing-room on the walls of which the first thing that struck him was a small painting of the Monarch of Latinia and a huge, full-length portrait, by a famous artist, of the great Dictator.

He was only kept for three minutes, when Count Radicati entered. The Count was wearing evening-dress, and on his broad chest he wore the Order of the Elephant, the Lion, the Eagle, and the sash of the Grand Cross of the Order of the Unicorn, and when he walked, the whole of his ironmongery rattled. Courteously he bowed, and Hugh, after the polite greetings were over, delivered his message.

"Ah! to-morrow, at ten o'clock," said the Count meditatively. "It is a pity we could not proceed to-night. Will you be prepared to deliver a complete experimental set to-morrow?"

"I am afraid I could not answer that question," replied Hugh diplomatically, "beyond saying that if that would be of service to you, I sincerely hope I shall be in such a position, but at ten to-morrow morning I shall be able to negotiate."

The old Count bowed again, then as Hugh rose to go, he said:

"Permit me to offer you some refreshments, signore."

Hugh thanked him and declined, and again assuring the Foreign Minister that he would see him in the morning, rushed back to the Brick-Bat Club, where he related in detail all that had taken place. The President was dumbfounded, and for several moments after Hugh had finished sat silent, then he spoke.

"Now, Valentroyd my boy, the position there is get-

ting a litle ticklish—not dangerous—but just a little ticklish. This Superintendent Bethume, who is a pretty shrewd man, as soon as you refused to talk, would instinctively know that you would come straight to me. If I do nothing, it means that I am either afraid, in his eyes, or that I am in conscience so guilty that I deem police inquiry a natural thing. I'm not sure but what he dragged you down there just to see its effect on me. Have you had a bite? Will you have a sandwich? Because after you've had a smack I'll show you how to deal with these big-footed bobbies."

Hugh ate some sandwiches while the President went to the Hawk's nest for a minute. When he came back he carried a bottle of liqueur cognac of '74.

"Try a drop of this with your sandwich, Valentroyd," he said, and Hugh drank a glass of the excellent cognac. He hurried over his snack, for he could see the President, who drank a couple of glasses quickly, was anxious to be off. Soon they were in a cab en route for the Yard, and when they arrived, the President walked boldly through the swing-doors, and his big commanding presence brought the officer in the hall to attention with a sharp salute immediately.

"I want to see Superintendent Bethume—important," he ordered.

"Will you please fill up this form?" The officer proffered a small green slip.

"No, I never fill up forms. Tell him Lord Halmene is here—I'm in a hurry."

"Very good, my lord," and immediately he called a constable and sent him with a hurried verbal message.

For perhaps three or four minutes they waited there—then the President spoke.

"Am I to be kept waiting here indefinitely? Have

you no telephone that you can use to let Bethume know I'm kept waiting?"

The officer mumbled something, and immediately took down the receiver from an instrument on the wall; evidently he was getting into trouble at the other end, for he was saying: "Yes, sir, but his lordship keeps insisting, sir. I beg your pardon, sir. Yes, sir." Turning to Lord Halmene, he said:

"He is sending down for your lordship now."

The President bowed, and at that moment a messenger appeared, respectfully calling Lord Halmene's name, and bade him follow, which he did with alacrity, Hugh bringing up the rear. They were taken straight to Bethume's room, and as they entered, Hugh saw that the two officers who had escorted him were there. The superintendent was sitting at his desk when they entered, but he rose, bowing courteously to the President as he greeted him.

"Good-evening, Lord Halmene. I had to keep you for a second or two—I was engaged."

The President nodded, then glancing at the two officers, bluntly asked: "Do you want these men present?"

"Well," began the superintendent, embarrassed.

"No matter—no matter." The President waved his hand. "Now, look here, Superintendent Bethume, I've come here to make a very serious complaint. *A very serious complaint indeed.* For some time I appear to have been the centre of a series of undesirable attentions on the part of various members of your department whose zeal exceeds their sense. Upon *two* occasions recently my yacht has been searched on the high seas—the last occasion, in the middle of the night, at great inconvenience to my guests and myself. These searches were frivolous—stupid. They were alleged to be to find

a girl whom I know—Sylvia Peyton. When I said the girl was not present, then the search became a personal reflection on me——"

"No, no," interrupted the superintendent. "She might well have been hiding. In the first case, the search was not on the high seas, but at Malta, and you were not present, my lord."

"Rubbish! Piffle!" denounced the President, thumping the table. "Valentroyd was there at Malta—wasn't his word good enough? I notice you also draw a distinction between the Malta search and the search on the high seas. Do you know, you bumpkin, that your action amounts to piracy? Who gave you permission to search vessels on the high seas? Permission which is denied to H.M. Navy in times of peace?"

The superintendent listened with coloured cheeks as the President proceeded, gathering impetus as he went on, his manner terrific, eyes flashing, jaw set, fist clenched. Occasionally he gave the table a rap which made the very inkstand jump. "Now to-night, you cap your pretty performance by practically arresting my friend Valentroyd, bringing him here on some pretext, informing him that he and I swindled an American of eight thousand pounds."

"No, no, my lord," interrupted the superintendent, but Lord Halmene overbore him.

"Have the manners to let me finish, will you?" he roared. "Now, look here, Bethume, if this is some silly practical joke—this persecution of us—then it's got to end. I don't often throw my weight about, but nevertheless I'm a member of the House of Lords, even a millionaire—yes, you may raise your eyebrows—a millionaire. I give to the very, very poor that you hustle more in a day than you earn in a year—unless you have

some good tips, which I don't think at all likely. Now, I'm going to raise this matter in Parliament. The very idea—searching my yacht on the high seas. Accusing a millionaire peer of card-sharpping! Heavens—what next?”

“You are wrong, Lord Halmene.” The superintendent was visibly rattled, and showed it. “My inquiries were entirely directed to getting information about the Brick-Bat Club——”

“Well! Well! Well! And what if they were,” interrupted the President. “My association with the Brick-Bat Club is quite a simple matter—there is no mystery about that. I find it an excellent medium for performing acts of charity to those whose need is frequently great but who do not squeal as loudly as the more successful pauper. Wives of men you lock up, and that sort of thing. With its motley membership, my influence is purely reformative. You've seen them visit my house—of course you have. I shall always open my door to a trier—never mind what your records may say about him—if I can give a hand I give it. But don't be so misguided as to take me for a ‘mug.’ I say, don't take me for a ‘mug.’ Peer millionaire, distributing fifty thousand a year to charity—and can prove every item! Now just think steadily for a bit and see if you're not biting off more than you can chew. I'll raise that search question, remember.”

As the President finished, he half turned to go and picked up his hat from the desk, but the superintendent was on his feet and intercepted him.

“I cannot allow you to go, my lord, believing that I accused you of winning that eight thousand by a trick. I only said that we found out that the American had lost such a sum——”

"Good-night, superintendent. I really can't stay to listen to more. Come along, Valentroyd," and the pair left, leaving a very shaken superintendent behind them and two police officers who had heard the impossible—their chief brow-beaten and utterly vanquished. They had listened in mixed admiration and horror, and as soon as they were freed, promptly went and bought each other a drink to celebrate an experience unique in their lives.

As soon as they got outside, the President turned to Hugh, and, giving one of his great, hearty laughs, inquired—"Will that do, Valentroyd?"

Hugh, who was intensely amused as well as astonished at the tremendous power of the President's action, replied:

"I should imagine that will put an end to annoyance from them—unless they find Sylvia Peyton."

"It'll give them pause, certainly," remarked the President complacently. "By the way, one of our members, you may have noticed him—old, white-whiskered ex-solicitor, named Blyth—he gave me that tip about the illegal search on the high seas. We could stick a writ into them for damage about that. As for Sylvia, she's all right—they won't get her—don't worry. Now where are you going? Home, I suppose. I had hoped we might dine together, but I shall be engaged for some hours, I find. Be at the club at nine o'clock sharp in the morning, will you?"

Hugh agreed, and they parted, proceeding by taxis in different directions. Hugh arrived home to be met by the disapproving face of James.

"Well, James, how are you?" he asked. "Anything of importance since I have been away?"

"I don't know whether you'd call them things of

importance, sir," began the butler, "but in my humble opinion, sir, I would certainly not describe them as without importance, if I may say so."

Hugh, who knew how utterly impossible it was to hurry James when he intended to take his time, sank into a large chair in his library and patiently waited for the old man to tell his story in his own way.

"To begin with, sir, your late father's kinsman, his Grace the Duke of Lynthaven called, and no one to receive him. I may say, sir, that in my long and pleasant service of your late father, sir, I never knew a nobleman of such high rank call without being properly received, sir, and His Grace——"

"Oh, James, do get on!" exclaimed Hugh. "After all, if the Duke wants people to receive him properly, he should give them notice."

"He did, sir, he did!" cried old James triumphantly, flourishing a letter bearing the ducal arms on the back, "but I had no address, sir, and didn't know where you were, and if I may say, sir——"

"Now, James, you must hurry up. What else?"

"Perhaps you will consider it of some importance that there has been a burglary in your absence, sir? Or would you rather have the housekeeping accounts, sir?" Hugh overlooked the privileged old man's sarcasm.

"Burglary?" he demanded. "To what extent?"

"It was two nights ago, sir," answered James, "and the police described it as most mysterious. I had just had a little of the '54 Amontillado, which, sir, you'll remember you gave me your kind permission to take a little of——"

Hugh tried again to stop the flow, but frequently as he interrupted, the old man would go off on another

tack, and it took Hugh a considerable time to elicit all the facts, which were, briefly, that the library had been ransacked and a large safe scientifically opened, a wall safe taken from the wall and opened. Papers were littered all over the floor, the backs of pictures cut, and absolutely nothing removed.

Instantly, of course, Hugh knew that there was some connection here with his mission to Latinia, and beyond feeling natural annoyance, was not excessively surprised. He went through his letters, and while he was reading them, the telephone-bell rang. It was the President.

“I say, Valentroyd,” he said, “could you meet me for a few minutes at once? Sorry to trouble you but something has occurred—I must see you. Have you had anything to eat yet? No, then we’ll have an opportunity to have something presently. Come round to the entrance of the Hotel Milan—I won’t say more over the ‘phone.”

Hugh agreed, and made preparations to follow the President’s instructions immediately. He entered the vestibule of the great Hotel Milan ten minutes later, and at once the President, who was sitting in a chair, sprang up, came across to him, and said:

“Hurry up, Valentroyd,” leading the way through the swing-doors and stepping into a taxi. “London Bridge,” he said to the commissionaire.

“Now grip tight, my boy, we’ve got to act, and act quickly. The unbelievable has happened. They’ve arrested Sylvia Peyton.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SYLVIA ARRESTED

To say that Hugh was horror-stricken at the President's news would be to under-state his condition. Though he had been tortured by fears as to Sylvia's safety for days, he had recently been re-assured by the news of her turning up in America, and the chief's optimistic view of her early retreat into safe hiding under his guidance. Now came the shattering of all these hopes. It was some time before he was able to speak.

"What are the exact particulars?" he asked.

"Well," replied the President, "it appears that an excellent description of the girl had been supplied by Scotland Yard to the American authorities, and by the time our agents had traced her, they were just too late. She had already been found by the police, and it is quite possible that when I was slating Superintendent Bethume, he knew that she had been arrested in America. Now, I don't want you to worry over her ultimate safety—that is assured. I am going to send you to three people to-night on that point, but the deuce of it is that she is a frightfully nervous, temperamental sort of girl. I don't quite know what will be the effect of the arrest on her. It would be possible for her to cause great inconvenience if she opened her mouth too much. I won't say that she could do me irreparable

injury—I don't think she could, but she would certainly make things decidedly awkward for us."

"You mean, then," said Hugh, "that there is no danger of the police obtaining a conviction against her?"

"Oh, not the least," replied the President in convincing tones. "Not the very faintest. You are now going to see the Bishop of Walsingham, who is in London for the Church Congress and staying at the St. James's Park Hotel. You will take this form with you,"—and here the President handed Hugh a form, on the top of which was engraved a broken brick—the symbol of the Brick-Bat Club. Below was typewritten: "On the night of the eighteenth of January I was at a dinner and ball at the house of the Countess of Rafferdon in Belverden Square, from seven in the evening until three the next morning and during that time Sylvia Peyton was rarely out of my sight."

Hugh read the form. "And the Bishop can swear to that?" he queried.

The President laughed.

"Swear? Yes, of course he can! You will also go to Dr. Fermin Tares, of Harley Street, and obtain his signature to a form, and to Lord Lenstrong, of Upper Duke Street, who will also sign."

"This seems to constitute an absolute alibi," observed Hugh. "How fortunate that such distinguished people were all present at Lady Rafferdon's ball."

"Say, rather, how fortunate that all these people happen to be members of the Brick-Bat Club!" rejoined the President, rather grimly. "Now you'll have to get off," he continued. "Get these round as soon as you can, then rejoin me at the club. I'll take another route and another three names—equally eminent."

The President stopped the taxi, and Hugh alighted. Evidently the former's first call was in the direction of London Bridge.

Hugh drove first of all to the Bishop of Walsingham's London hotel, and, catching him in, presented him form and simply said that Lord Halmene wished him to sign it.

"Ah, yes," said the Bishop, "the eighteenth of January. Very well," and, without further demur, he signed the form, bowed in a friendly way to Hugh, and dismissed him. Hugh then proceeded to the Harley Street specialist and the Earl of Lenstrong, who both signed. Equipped with his three signatures, he returned to the club. Here he waited for a quarter of an hour, after which, feeling very hungry, he ordered a meal. He had only eaten two small sandwiches in the club prior to his visit to Scotland Yard with the President since he left Marseilles. Just as he was about to give his order to the waiter, however, Lord Halmene returned, and immediately came across.

"Get 'em all right?" he asked, and, as Hugh replied in the affirmative, said that he had got his, too.

"She's as safe as the bank if she only holds firm, doesn't speak. I don't know what to think of that prospect. She's loyal enough, but fragile. I hate her being tried like this, unsupported."

"I'm convinced that Sylvia will stick to her oath," answered Hugh.

The President quickly agreed. "So am I, if she can," he said, "but a girl, small and fragile, alone, against a lot of that police crowd. That's what you've got to look at. Come on, my boy, let's have some food." He hailed a waiter and ordered a corner table.

Lord Halmene let the fish depart before he spoke again.

"Amazing how good everything is when you're hungry, isn't it—as the French say, 'hunger seasons all the dishes.'" Hugh nodded acquiescence, and the President continued:

"I've just been thinking. So far as Sylvia Peyton is concerned, *you* needn't worry. It's the club—myself—that's got to worry. If she keeps her mouth shut, we're all right; if she doesn't, then it's quite possible I'll have to resort to drastic measures, which means a pretty wholesale use of our little gadget."

Hugh, who knew perfectly well that he could only refer to the instrument of death which had already been used twice, within his knowledge, could not repress a shudder at the thought that the apparently urbane, even benevolent individual, enjoying his excellent dinner with keen appreciation easily to be seen on his face, could at the same time, without an apparent qualm, calmly talk of sending a number of persons to their deaths, to save his club from exposure and himself from ruin.

The President, who possessed the faculty of reading the minds of those he was deeply interested in to an uncanny extent, saw that he had disturbed Hugh's susceptibilities, and he added:

"When one's committed as deeply as I am—one has to defend one's self. I don't for a moment suppose that such drastic measures as I indicated will be necessary, but rather than have my associates and myself sacrificed, I would be perfectly prepared to use means that would appear unscrupulous beyond ordinary imagination. Again, Valentroyd, be assured I don't anticipate the necessity. So long as Sylvia Peyton keeps her

mouth closed, we're all right, and I think she will. Now, let us talk of more immediate affairs. This new development means that I shall have to remain in London. Sylvia can't arrive here for some time. There are all the extradition proceedings to be gone through, and they may take some weeks, but something may arise whereby I can release her on the other side. But you ought to be on the way to the East again to-morrow night. I will look after all that, don't worry. Now, to-morrow morning you will see old Radicati at the Latinian Embassy at ten o'clock, and you will pick up a document that I am having prepared at nine o'clock or nine-thirty—it will not be necessary for me to be there—at the club. This document sets forth a pretty strong case for a demand of fifty-thousand pounds forthwith, and promises delivery within a week of a complete experimental plant, together with a number of tested instruments. The political situation is such that I think they're bound to accept. You must say that you have my absolute assurance that delivery will be effected in a week, but that a necessary condition is that the fifty-thousand pounds be paid forthwith. Whatever they say you must stick to that. Get fifty-thousand pounds before you leave. Old Radicati will 'hum' and 'ha,' but you stick to your point and threaten to break the whole contract down if you don't get the money."

"Of course, I shall obey," replied Hugh, "but do you think they will pay a large amount like that before they receive any proof of our willingness or ability to deliver?"

"Unless I'm greatly mistaken, they'll pay once or twice more yet," the President complacently remarked.

Hugh, who felt exceedingly uncomfortable about the

whole transaction, said nothing, but decided that, so far as he could, he would avoid the inner knowledge of either the instrument of death or the fraud—as it was obviously the President's idea to continue to obtain money from the Latinian Government without giving them any return for it. Plausible though his arguments were, they were not convincing to Hugh, whose respect for the constitution and laws was that of the ordinary rich young man who has never felt anything but the beneficent effects of the law in protecting his extensive property.

When, after finally parting with the President late in the night, Valentroyd went home, he sat up long, staring into his library fire and ruminating on the weird position he was in. He felt his situation worse in London than when he was away. Somehow, in the Eastern atmosphere of Cairo and Alexandria, in the romantic setting of the Mediterranean, the President and his terrible club did not seem so extraordinary, but here in London—the very hub of civilised life—a city exceeded by none in the world for its firm hold on good government, where vice was better checked than in any other capital of half the size—such a confraternity was grotesque. Yet, he reflected, it was here in London that the President had his headquarters. He had that night bearded the police authorities in their den; brow-beaten important officials as though they had been domestic servants. There was a certain perverse humour in the strange anomaly, and Hugh smiled as he thought of it, but this did not comfort him in his extreme dejection at the moment.

Under the spell of the President's terrific personality, he had almost participated in the latter's triumph at Scotland Yard; had felt a gratification that the author-

ities, who had protected him, were soundly trounced, but now the re-action had come and he was looking on the blacker side of things. The end of all this, he reflected, was bound to be disastrous. No underground organisations can hope to flourish for ever against the strength of organised society, even though temporary advantages might be obtained and for some time maintained by the possession of an unknown, swift weapon of death such as the President held. Again and again, Hugh reflected, he might never have been in this mess if he had not stopped to speak to Sylvia Peyton that wet, stormy night in Piccadilly. Now, try as he would, there was simply no way out. He must continue—even perhaps progress in participation in the President's scheme—or die. By now his low-water mark of depression was reached, and the thought of little Sylvia Peyton, locked up in some American prison, brought a great revulsion of feeling with it. If he had never met Sylvia, he would never have known the joy of his love for her and the joy of the knowledge that she loved him.

It was worth it. Yes, though it meant his association with people and schemes repugnant to his nature, he was glad. If the price was heavy—the prize was great. Yes, he must go on, no use to fight fate, and if fate were ruffling the pleasant waters of his life, yet fate was also giving him a great object to steer to. Hugh's jaw was resolutely set, and there was a determined look in his eyes as he mounted the staircase at last to sleep for a few hours prior to his engagements of the day that had already begun.

The hour of nine-fifteen found him at the club, where the Hawk received him and handed him a long sealed packet.

The Hawk talked as agreeably as he knew how for

a few moments on racing subjects and boxing, then Hugh left for the Latinian Embassy, which he reached just before ten o'clock, but early though he was, he was not kept waiting a moment, but taken to the room he had previously entered, and was greeted by the white-headed Count Radicati, looking very smart in his fashionably-cut morning-coat and white waistcoat. The Count took the packet, then, excusing himself, disappeared with it, and Hugh was left for a quarter of an hour alone. Eventually he returned, accompanied by a tall, sallow individual, with the mark of a wound on one side of his lean face.

"This is Colonel Zanetti, our military attaché here," said the Count, introducing him to Hugh. The newcomer acknowledged the introduction, bowed stiffly and waited. The Count went on:

"I must confess, Signor Valentroyd, that the contents of this letter astonish and perplex me. You must be aware that it is the custom of my Government, and every Government, however generous we may be in paying for an article of value, to insist upon deliveries before the purchase money is handed over. In this case your chief, the Viscount Halmene, demonstrated, in a very efficient though a very small way, the power of his invention and disclosed broadly the principle on which it is alleged to work. He said his expenses were such that fifty-thousand pounds must be paid as a deposit. His invention is important—true. My Government require it—equally true. We made an exception. We gave the Viscount the fifty-thousand pounds he asked for, and in return he promised to deliver a certain complete experimental set within seven days. The Viscount has failed, and I come to London. What do I find? The Viscount refuses to see me, and sends you to deliver

what you call the goods? Oh, dear no! To ask, forsooth, for a further fifty-thousand pounds. Signore, it is infamous."

"Then I take it the interview is over," said Hugh, rising.

"Over? Over? Madonna Santa! It is but just beginning!" The old Count shrieked in his excitement. The military attaché looked gloomily at Hugh, but did not speak. Hugh waited quietly, and the Count spoke again.

"Now, signore, what have you to say?"

"I think you stated the case, Your Excellency, with such admirable precision that I would not venture to improve on your words. I will merely point out that in the letter I have handed to you, I am given to understand that there is a pledge of delivery at some short date. I am also instructed that the demand for a further sum of fifty-thousand pounds is not unreasonable, but simply unavoidable. It would appear that the expenses incurred for a variety of reasons, for this invention of great value, are also very considerable."

In silence the three looked at one another—all were standing. It was the Count who again broke the silence.

"Signor Valentroyd—I will speak to you with a straightness that you English say you appreciate—therefore it is that you must not be offended. We have looked up what one might call your pedigree, and it is a good one. I did not tell you before, but your father and I were colleagues together in the Diplomatic Corps at Constantinople in the years that seem so long ago. You are also a rich man, signore. You do not need to resort to sharp practices to live. Now, why are you associated with this enterprise?—I said I would speak straight."

Completely taken aback by this change of tactics on the part of the cunning old Count, Hugh was temporarily nonplussed. He kept his bearing perfectly rigid, however, under the keen old eyes that so closely watched him. However infamous he might appear, the truth still remained—that he was just as much bound by his oath. There was only one thing to do.

“I am associated with this enterprise in my capacity as a friend of Lord Halmene,” he said firmly.

“And you vouch for the good faith of the Viscount?” Keenly were the old eyes searching him.

“Well, Your Excellency, these negotiations had been opened before I appeared on the scene, you will be good enough to remember. I should have imagined that the good faith of Lord Halmene was a thing to be judged entirely by the merits of his invention, not by any other factor.”

“You mean he is above a cunning action?” Still the Count’s eyes pierced him.

“Your Excellency,” Hugh smiled, “surely you have chosen to depart far from the language of diplomacy! ‘Cunning action!’ I should have thought these words written on the tombstone of a dead diplomatist—‘He was a man of cunning action’—would be to announce to posterity his success.”

The military attaché gave a quick smile, then his face became quite impassive again.

“Signor Valentroyd chose to jest,” said the Count, “but I repeat I said I was going to speak straightly not diplomatically. I will be straighter still. Signore, is your friend the Count—Viscount Halmene—an honest man?”

“My views of my friend’s probity must be taken for granted,” declared Hugh. “I do not intend to stand

here and eulogise him. On the other hand, I do not intend to receive any more veiled insults. I will go."

"No! No! A thousand times no," shouted the excited Count. "You completely miss the eye of the bull. I only ask. I compliment you. I vouch for you—even the Dictator approves of you—from your record. Listen to me, Signor Valentroyd, before I obtained the grant of that fifty-thousand pounds from the Treasury, I practically committed myself to sponsoring the deal. Not exactly in finance, but a failure would be damaging to me. Now, just as I sponsored the thing, as it were, I would certainly have to do it again if we pay another fifty-thousand pounds. Now, don't you see, I want *you* to say that in *your* knowledge we shall be safe."

"You may thank the Dictator for his condescending to believe me honest," said Hugh. "For the rest, I must decline to be an underwriter of insurance for Latinian risks. The premiums—of dictatorial favour—are not high enough."

"Signor Valentroyd, you scoff at the Diplomatic Corps—you are a loss to that body. Will you answer this question? I will only ask one. Have you any doubts about the matter? Have you any doubts about Viscount Halmene's desire or ability to carry out his pledge?" The Count spoke very earnestly.

"Your Excellency," Hugh replied firmly, with just a touch of irritation. "You are merely re-framing your original question. I have said Lord Halmene is my friend—that is surely enough. With regard to the invention, I simply know nothing about its construction—its principle—nothing. But I have seen it in action twice." As he spoke Hugh could not repress a slight shudder at the memory of his friend Raymond Gaunt's

death, and the lesser horror, but still pathetic death, of Whining Willie.

The military attaché, who had been watching closely, gave a significant glance at the Count, who in turn looked at him. The Count then again excused himself, and Colonel Zanetti, and they both withdrew. Within three minutes they returned.

"Will you please take this cheque to Viscount Hal-mene," said the Count, handing Hugh a cheque for fifty-thousand pounds, "and this sealed packet?"

Hugh appreciated the compliment implied in not enclosing the money in the packet. Refreshment was offered him. Hugh refused, and was very quickly speeding on his way to the club. Then the President listened closely to all he said, took the cheque, opened the packet, and read the contents carefully, whilst Hugh sat silently waiting.

Finally the President spoke. He folded up the papers, thrust them into his pocket, and then said:

"Valentroyd, you've done well—excellently. I couldn't have imagined anyone handling them better. They are pressing me, of course, for immediate delivery, and state they will not advance another penny until experimental sets are transferred and a plant laid down in the Latinian Arsenal for production there. Ha! Ha! Ha!—What a buoyant thing is hope, springing eternal in the human breast and brightly picturing the walls of dictators' palaces. You may safely leave them to me. I'll look after them for the time being. You may have to see them again later, and later still you may have to watch yourself, my boy—that old be-whiskered fellow will be like a tiger bereft of its cubs presently. Now, I want you to get right out of things for a few days—even a few weeks possibly. You have been having a

rushing time, and you will have plenty of excitement where you are going, but a few days rest first. In any case, you will find the whole change of scene and activity restful. You and I will never be out of wireless touch, and we have a code. Now, at three o'clock this afternoon, you will begin your journey by air to Mosul, where, at this address, you will find Ibn. You need have no fear of missing him. The pilot who takes you has dropped Ibn and me there several times."

The President handed Hugh a slip of paper on which were written characters in Arabic, and below in English:

"The Kaid Abdullah el Anda, Mosul."

"The Kaid," the President continued, "is absolutely loyal to old Ibn, and in his confidence completely. Everything is there—money, arms, men, horses—everything, and I wish I were coming with you. Good-bye!" Hugh bade his chief farewell and departed to prepare for the strangest adventure he had ever heard of. Arriving home, old James met him.

"They are still waiting, sir," he said grimly.

"Who are waiting?" asked Hugh, perplexed.

"Your foreign friends, sir, whom you sent to await your return, sir, in the library."

"I sent no one here," said Hugh, who promptly rushed into the library.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A QUEER MEAL

HUGH VALENTROYD opened the door of the library, but nobody was there. He stood for a moment on the threshold and surveyed the room. Clearly something extraordinary had taken place. The safe door, for the second time within the week, stood wide open—the books were pulled off the shelves. A round, cylindrical tin case, containing plans of his Scottish estate, had been ripped open and the plans were scattered about the floor. The old butler, James, stood at his elbow.

"How long have you left the people alone here, James? What were they like?"

"Sir, they were burglars. It is clear to me they were burglars, sir," said the old man.

"Obviously," Hugh said impatiently. "Answer my question, James. What were they like? How long did you leave them undisturbed?"

"I should say they were there about half-an-hour in all. I went into the room a quarter of an hour ago in answer to a ring. One of the gentlemen asked if I had any message from you, sir. I said I had not, and then he said, they would wait, sir, but told me to remain in the hall to let you know they were here at once, sir, as they were in a hurry to get off to some appointment, sir, as soon as they had seen you."

Hugh made a close examination of the room. The window was open at the bottom, indicating the manner

of the strangers' exit. A careful examination revealed no single article missing that Hugh could trace.

"Shall I ring up the police, sir?" inquired James.

Hugh, remembering his experience with the police on the previous night, and under orders for immediate departure—considering also that the cause of the outrage was perfectly well-known to him—decided that it was better not to invite more official notice than was necessary.

"Nothing appears to have gone, James," he said, "and I am on the point of going away for a few days again, so I don't think we will be bothered with the police."

"Of course, you know best, sir," James replied, "and I would not presume to contradict you, but, if I may say so, sir, it is a remarkable thing that all these extraordinary happenings date from the time you brought home the unfortunate man called Whining Willie. I am sure I do not wish——"

"That will do, James," Hugh ordered. "Just clear up this room, will you? I will go into the morning-room. I am leaving at two-thirty and have a number of things to attend to before then."

He left the old man mumbling discontent, and attended to such matters as were urgent, glancing through his Scottish steward's accounts and noting that a substantial balance was available at his bankers for current expenses. He then turned his attention to answering the ordinary letters of his friends and acquaintances who had missed him for a few days.

His writing done, Hugh found the time was later than he thought—it was nearly two o'clock, so he ordered his lunch, had a suit-case packed, and at two-thirty was ready for departure. Up to the last moment

he had hoped that some message might come through from the President giving him further information of Sylvia, but none came, and at last he bade the disapproving James good-bye and entered the taxi which had been called, to proceed to Croydon Aerodrome.

There a machine was waiting, and Hugh was gratified to find in charge the same pilot who had taken him previously to Marseilles. He had some conversation with him before the machine took the air, and ascertained that this was a four days' flight to Mosul, given good weather conditions, and the reports from all along the route were propitious. The last inspections having been made, and the engines having been carefully tested, the biplane took the air, and the great adventure was begun. As he looked down on the labyrinth of streets and fields and hedges and woods that so rapidly flew to the rear below him, Hugh reflected that only a short time ago he had been envying Raymond Gaunt the activity and adventures of his life and lamenting the monotony of his own. How strangely fate had changed everything! Now—in a very short space of time—Raymond Gaunt was dead, and he, Hugh Valentynd, easy-going man-about-town, so recently bemoaning the lack of interest in his life, was a bound servant of the organisation which was responsible for his friend's death.

Outrageous as the thought was—it was true, and he was now on his way to take part in an adventure the like of which, had he read it a few short weeks previously in some fiction magazine, he would have impatiently thrown aside as too fantastically improbable. One of the curious things about the position in which he found himself was that, in spite of his knowledge of the evil that undoubtedly prevailed in the Brick-Bat Club, he

could not resist a certain joy of adventure that the new circumstances of his life afforded him. He tried to stifle the feeling. The murderer of his friend—that was what the club was. There was no doubt about that. The President had never troubled to deny it. Would it not have been more honourable to bid them do their worst? To die, as defiance would obviously have meant, rather than become an unwilling ally? Put in that way, Hugh felt that the obvious judgment of an impartial person would be that he was a coward. Yet death—certain death—would deprive him of the power to help Sylvia, whom he knew he loved. His sacrifice of his life would not bring Raymond Gaunt back again, and when all was said and done, Raymond Gaunt had pitted himself, as it were, against the President—and had lost.

No, there could be no going back now, whatever the future held he was committed, and he would play his hand boldly, trusting in the future to unravel the tangle. In the present, trusting in the President to secure Sylvia Peyton's return. On this point he was really very satisfied. He had interviewed a Bishop, a Harley Street Specialist, and a Peer, all of whom would swear that on the night in question Sylvia could not have been at the scene of the murder in Regent Street, and the President had secured more, and equally eminent witnesses. The alibi was perfect. Again Hugh felt an element of comfort in the fact that such people as these—eminent medical men, bishops and peers, were members of the Brick-Bat Club, and answered unhesitatingly to the call of the President. What could be their motive for membership of such a club? Not financial, certainly. It was all a mystery, Hugh was still pondering, when the 'plane began to descend, marking

the end of the first stage of their journey. For four days they travelled, crossing the continent of Europe and then flying over the bleak and wild outposts of Asia. The Suez Peninsula was passed and the south of the Assyrian desert. No bad weather assailed them and no breakdowns occurred, but by the time the journey's end was approaching, Hugh was very weary of the hurried travel. He was also anxious to reach Mosul in order to get some message or other from the President which would tell him some news of Sylvia. All things end, and there came a time when the pilot pointed to a small group of buildings, barely discernible in the distance, and Hugh knew that this must be Mosul.

As they approached the town, Hugh could see that it was of some considerable size and typically Eastern in its appearance. Minarets of mosques dotted the picture stretched out below him, and as the 'plane dropped lower and lower, groups of people could be seen looking curiously up at it, for 'planes were still rare enough to be a curiosity in this part. Only a very short while ago they meant dire calamity, and were greatly feared in consequence, for, during the war, the missions of aeroplanes to this area were of a very sinister character. To a plot of sparsely grassed land on the outskirts of the town, the pilot directed the machine as he dived, and in an incredibly short time they had touched land and were "taxi-ing" along the uneven ground.

Coming to rest, Hugh noticed a small group of people approaching, one distinguished by his silk robes and fine carriage. This man was tall, wiry, and of a particularly dignified bearing. His lean face was paler than most of his compatriots—it seemed as if

even the desert suns had failed in their attempts to bronze the man. His character, Hugh judged in a second, was reliable and strong, for the eyes that looked out of the lean face were large and honest. He wore a black beard in which no grey hair had its part, and now raised his right hand in greeting. In perfect English tones he spoke, without a trace of accent.

"You are Hugh Valentroyd?"

"Yes," replied Hugh, "and you are, I am sure, the——"

"I am Abdullah el Anda," interrupted the other gravely, "and I bid you very welcome." He turned to his followers, and, having spoken a few words in Arabic, he approached the pilot, who came to attention in military style, and saluted the tall, dark figure confronting him.

"I have to thank you for again delivering a guest to me safely and quickly. Hassan will attend to you as he always does."

A stout, clean-shaven, jovial-looking Arab sprang forward, whose robes and the chain about his neck bespoke some office of importance in the Kaid's household. Before leaving the pilot to accompany Abdullah, Hugh noticed that the stout man Hassan and the pilot were evidently firm friends, for their greetings were cordial in the extreme and there was a light in their eyes such as only appears when good comrades meet. As they walked towards a high wall on the far side of the bare ground where the 'plane was left, the Kaid Abdullah questioned Hugh as to the health of the President and details of the journey, showing at the same time a lively interest in the places at which he had stopped en route. Through a doorway in the high wall, they entered a garden. It was magnificently-

tended, and in a land where water is precious, Hugh noticed that ornamental fountains played amidst the beautifully laid-out flower beds. Hugh complimented the Kaid on the garden as they crossed it towards the house.

"I am glad you like it—I love flowers," he said simply.

Entering a narrow doorway in a large black wall, they walked along a passage, then moving a curtain, his guide stepped aside to allow Hugh to precede him into a typically Oriental room. Carpets, rugs, divans, curtains—all richly embroidered. The atmosphere was slightly perfumed, the impression being one of soft comfort and silence. Sitting down at the bidding of his host, Hugh was presently supplied with wine, and after some further conversation, the Kaid suggested that he would like to see his room and perhaps rest for the hour that must elapse before the evening meal. Very thoughtfully he begged Hugh not to stand on ceremony, but to have something now in his room if he felt hungry. Hugh, however, declined, whilst thanking him. He followed Abdullah along passages and up a staircase, then along another passage and finally into a room that was a strange mixture of East and West. A lattice window, heavily-barred, overlooked the garden of flowers. A huge divan in the corner, composed of magnificent cushions, served instead of a bed, and rugs were folded on it, some silk, some of fur. Instead of sheets there were thin silk coverings. A small bookcase and a dressing-table of French workmanship gave the room a Western touch, and Hugh noticed that the authors of the books contained in the bookcase were French and English. After he had shown

Hugh the room, and the latter had thanked him, he said:

"As you know, my brother, you will be with me for a little while. I want you to ask for anything you miss that would minister to your comfort. There is one other thing. You will be better and safer in our dress than Western dress, so I have laid out here some clothing and I will send a servant to attend you in half-an-hour. I shall send your letters to you now—you will probably like them without further delay."

The Kaid withdrew, and Hugh gazed curiously at the strange garments that were to be his clothing. He noticed that they were silk and was rather amused to see what he would look like in them.

He was interrupted by a boy bearing three envelopes. They were cables, coded, from the President. The first two said: "Nothing new re Sylvia Peyton," and had been sent on successive days, which showed the President was remembering his anxiety. The third one said, "Have established contact with Sylvia Peyton—she is firm—have assured her of absolute protection—she sends message of satisfaction."

This was good news, and, though brief, it had taken Hugh some time to decode it, and he had barely finished when a servant entered and told him the Kaid had sent him to assist his dressing. This man spoke broken-English, but could make himself understood. Hugh took off his clothes and the process of transformation began. Soon he was standing before the mirror in the dressing-table and surveying himself.

He had been inclined to laugh; even now he was a little amused, but the effect of the Eastern robes on him was to give him a new dignity, and, at the same time, make him look much older. The jewelled dag-

ger, the handle of which was smoothly worn, and the blade, razor-like in sharpness, Hugh felt could record a terrible history. The sword, which he had not yet strapped on, was a magnificent specimen of Persian workmanship. From the distance sounded the call to prayer, and Hugh's body-servant, turning Eastward, dropped low instantly. Hugh wondered if he would also have to follow that ritual. Soon after the man had risen, deep-sounding gongs in the distance signalled that the evening meal was ready, and Hugh followed the servant along the passage, padding strangely in his sandals, with the strange new rustle of flowing robes as an accompaniment to his steps. A long low table, spread with silver and glass, occupied the centre of the room into which Hugh was ushered, and there he noticed were already gathered five men. One was his friend the Kaid, who came forward hands outstretched to greet him, another was the old Sheik Ibn-el-Said, who raised his venerable head and stepped forward, lightly and swiftly for an old man, to welcome Hugh again. The Kaid respectfully stood to one side while the old man took Hugh by the shoulders, kissed him, and expressed his joy at seeing him.

"I expected thee, my son, two days after I saw thee in Alexandria, but the Emir Halmene cabled me that it was not so to be. By the grace of Allah thou art here now, and my heart is content."

There was such a world of sincerity in the old man's eyes that Hugh felt quite glad to be there. In the West one never expresses such pleasure at seeing people—but in the West probably, Hugh reflected, one is never very sincere about anything—there are so many distractions. But his host was calling him, and the remaining men were introduced. One was Mustapha

Din—a great soldier, the Kaid said, though Mustapha deprecated the compliment. Another was Fuad-el-Gaza, an expert in the art of quartermastering. He had been a quartermaster in the special Arabian detachment of the British Army, Abdullah said. The third was Fazly Bey—a member of a very old Turkish family—rebel, now, because the present politics of Turkey were anathema to him, and he had thrown in his lot with the Sheik Ibn-el-Said, whom indeed he had known and venerated all his life, to use his own words. The introductions performed, the meal began. Again there was a mixture of East and West, for though soup and fish were served, and everyone ate a little, Hugh could not help realising that it was only out of compliment to him. The soup and fish were both excellent, but they were merely touched by the other members of the party.

Then came the *pièce de resistance*. A huge cauldron-like pan was laboriously brought by three servants and placed on its feet on the table. Instantly, Hugh saw this was going to have a different reception. Huge silver plates were piled up with meat that was taken from the cauldron in lumps like footballs in size. Rice was ladled out of the pan and chunks of flat bread were served. Herbs flavoured the stew—it was mutton, Hugh found, and very tender and good. He noticed his host smiled his approval as he saw Hugh was enjoying, and not merely simulating enjoyment of his meal. Excellent Greek wine was served, and Hugh noticed that all the guests went back again and again to the massive cauldron. This course took over half-an-hour, and was eaten in silence.

Then small dishes of preserved fruits and all sorts of curious confections were served, of which all took

a little. They were sickly in their sweetness, but Hugh ate some, and then the table was cleared and cups of coffee were served. Large pipes were brought—but nobody used them, and cigarettes were placed on the table. The Kaid glanced towards the Sheik Ibn-el-Said, and the latter, after meditatively regarding the shaded lamp before him, looked into the shadows round the table which half cloaked his hearers, and speaking in English in low deep tones, began his address:

“I think myself fortunate, and I praise Allah—blessed be his name—that in my necessities I have never been deserted by my friends. It is written in the Koran that a man who removeth his neighbour’s landmark is accursed. You who hear me will bear witness that I, Ibn-el-Said, have done justice to the poor, have fed the beggar and the stranger, and the landmarks of my neighbours have been as sacred to me as the memory of the Prophet. I have lived many years, and more than ten have gone since I passed the allotted span, but, praise be to Allah the One, ‘My eye is not dimmed, nor is the strength of my arm abated.’ I would be a shame and a reproach to my sons for ever, were I, Ibn-el-Said, to be gathered to my fathers without restoring to them the heritage of their fathers, for untold generations. Nay, the very paths of paradise would be a wilderness to me, and the dark-eyed houris there would laugh me to scorn. Great is Allah! and of infinite compassion, for he has heard the prayers of the afflicted and has strengthened the weak against the strong.

“Time was when, in misery and shame, I was a fugitive and an outcast from the lands that had borne the rule of my house since the city of Constantine fell from the hands of the Christians. I say that Christians

shall not be anathematised again in my presence for ever, for the followers of the Nazarene have been amongst my friends in adversity, whose loyalty may Allah reward, and one is here to-night."

The old man stopped for a minute or so, and was visibly shaken by his emotion, then he continued:

"My sons, I am going to tell you how Allah the Great and All-merciful hath delivered my enemy into my hands."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A ROD IN PICKLE

"ALLAH has delivered my enemy into my hands," repeated the old Sheik.

Everyone listened in tense silence. In the dim light Hugh could just see the outline of the faces of the other men, but the silence testified to their acute interest, and sympathy with the old man. Again, after a pause, Ibn-el-Said continued:

"For years I have sought means to avenge myself on that Greek son of a dog, Pampadoulos, and repay the double treachery of the Emir Yusef, with usury, but the obstacles in my way have been great, and it was only when I was granted the good fortune of meeting the great Emir of the Western World, the Lord Halmene, that his counsels directed a way by which punishment, merited and condign, might be dealt out to the treacherous, and good gold at the same time placed into our treasury.

"In the high country, three days' march from where we now sit, one well has been bored which is richer than any other in the whole of Mesopotamia. Four other properties on the lands which by right are still mine have been exploited, and are even now daily, even hourly, placing gold into the pockets of the cursed Pampadoulos and the son of perdition, the Emir Yusef. Now the great Lord Halmene, whose wisdom is greater

than that of any man I have ever met, has devised a cunning plan, by which the disaster of Pampadoulos and the Emir Yusef will be gain to us. I do not quite understand the operation by which this excellent result is to be obtained, but it has to do with the question of insurance. By the payment of certain monies, the Lord Halmene becomes entitled to a very large sum should evil befall the wells operated by the syndicate that the Greek has formed, in a certain time. The monies have been paid, and the disaster is provided for, and we, my friends, are here to-night to arrange the details of that disaster. The amount involved is great—it is even beyond a million pounds in English money, and the risks are not very great.

“There is another aspect to this matter, and that a profitable one. Once a month the Greek arranges to pay all his workers their wages. During each month they are entitled to run up bills of credit at the stores, which are, of course, owned by himself, and these bills must be paid when they get their monthly money. Now this gold is taken from the banks, in this city of Mosul, on a certain day, and in total for all his ventures it amounts to one hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and the Lord Halmene and I have decided that we will take the next delivery. The manner of the taking is simple. On the last Friday in every month the cashier of the company comes down to Mosul in a motor-car, escorted by two other cars. In order to be protected from chance attack by wandering Bedouins, one of the cars carries a machine-gun, and the occupants of each car are armed with rifles and pistols. At a certain point on their journey where the road narrows as it proceeds through a pass in the hills, we will lie in wait. We will have not only several machine-guns

but two pieces of artillery, and we will take the gold from the infidels—the gold that should be mine.

“Now the properties are widely separated, the wells lie twenty miles apart, so that it will be necessary for us to devise a cunning plan that all may be attacked at once, so that assistance may not be invoked from the Government, who would immediately send aeroplanes with bombs to put an end to us. Now it is to devise a suitable plan, to destroy all the workings at once, that Hugh Valentroyd, a distinguished officer of the British Army, is here with us to-night. He is one with us—one of us. He is vouched for by the great Lord Halmene, whom I am proud to call friend and benefactor. Now I will show him the maps that we took from the Government office, on which the properties are carefully marked, with the exact distances and the nature of the land and all such-like information, and he will instruct us how the matter should go forward. You, Mustapha, who have seen much warfare, will give the greatest attention to the words of Hugh Valentroyd and will obey his directions without question.”

The old sheik looked across at Mustapha Din, who gravely inclined his head, and answered:

“I am glad to sit at the feet of my Commander and friend, Hugh Valentroyd.”

“It is well,” rejoined Ibn-el-Said. “For only by implicit obedience and whole-hearted loyalty are victories won. There are, Hugh Valentroyd, guarding the wells, a small detachment of the Emir Yusef’s forces. He is paid, by the Government of Britain, a large sum to keep a protecting army over the whole district, but as he is a greedy man, his army does not number one-tenth of the strength he states, and which is paid for.

At each of the wells there are supposed to be nearly one thousand troops, but in reality there are not a hundred. When the periods of inspection arrive, the Emir speedily mobilises a scratch force—Allah knows there is no difficulty in obtaining soldiers in this country. So that when the Government inspector arrives, he sees a considerable force, but were he to remain for a day or so longer, or suddenly return, he would see but several ill-paid old men, as officers, and a few ill-equipped sons of improvidence to represent the army.

“It is written, my son, ‘Thou canst not build an Ivory Palace and be as if thou hadst not spent thy substance’—and it is a true saying, for the Emir Yusef has many palaces, and great is his harem, but his army is small. At thy command, my son, are two thousand men. There is equipment for them and to spare. In the armoury lie still three thousand rifles from Japan and more than a million rounds of ammunition. There are also two English field-guns of eighteen pound projectile weight, and for these guns there is a great store of shells. Also there is a quantity of a great explosive marked ‘T.N.T.’, but this is an explosive that is not rightly understood amongst us, for at the command of Mustapha, two young men who had some knowledge of artillery made experiments, and not rightly understanding the mysteries of this strong explosive, made some grievous error—and are not.

“Of this strong explosive there are eight cases, which were removed by Kaid Abdullah’s young men in the years just after the war in mistake for something more valuable. At the time my friend Abdullah was greatly disappointed, but praise be to Allah, for he has ordained that the very means to ruin our enemies are freely at our service. This is Thursday, and in eight

days we are to do our work, for the Friday of next week is the last in the month. Between now and then, thou, my son, wilt deliver a plan to me for the destruction of the oil wells, and Mustapha will have it carried out. This will be done on the day and as nearly as possible at the time that the ambush is prepared against the motor-cars bearing the money from the Mosul banks. All the particulars I shall deliver to thee to-night, my son, and thou shalt meditate upon the matter and call upon any or all of us who will remain here until thou hast prepared thy plan. I have done, and may Allah prosper us even as we merit His blessing."

The old man sank his venerable head on to his chest and remained for some moments in silence—a silence that none present broke. When finally he lifted his head again, it was the Kaïd Abdullah who first spoke.

"The hour advances," he said, "and as our friend has travelled fast and far, it is meet that he should retire and refresh himself in sleep. My father, wilt thou deliver the plans to him now, so that if he should be disposed to consider upon them before the morning he shall have opportunity?"

These last words were addressed to Ibn-el-Said, who rose immediately, and, crossing the room, brought from a corner a skin bag, which he opened, and from it took a bundle of papers.

"These are the plans, my son," he said, placing the papers in Hugh's hand. "Thou shalt go through them at thy will, and upon such matters as thou requirest enlightenment I shall consult with thee after the morning meal."

Hugh took the papers, and, not sorry to get to his bed, bade them all good-night.

When he got to his room, he examined the papers, and found them to consist of a Government Ordnance map of the district in which the oil wells were situated, covering an area of over a hundred miles, several plans of the workings, the road map in detail from Mosul to the wells, and the official lists of the strength and quantity of the "T.N.T."

The latter almost made him gasp. Only after a war where vast quantities of high-explosive were daily used, would it have been possible for Abdullah's marauding bands to have got hold of such an amount. There was enough to blow up sixty oil wells, let alone four. After some cursory examination of the plans, Hugh undressed and was soon fast asleep.

In the morning he took several seconds on awakening to realise where he was; then, observing that the sun was high, he looked at his watch, which he had set properly the night before, and found that it was nearly nine o'clock. He dressed as well as he could in his unaccustomed clothes, then rang the hand-bell in his room. Almost before the ringing ceased, the curtains were pulled aside, and the servant who had attended him the night before entered. First of all he put right the errors that Hugh had made in dressing, then he silently preceded him along the route to the room where he had eaten the night before. Here only the Sheik Ibn-el-Said was present, and he straightway greeted Hugh, telling him at the same time that the other members of the party were out riding, and in the case of Mustapha, examining a detachment of followers which he was sending on to the point of concentration to join the two thousand.

"Hast thou yet had opportunity of looking at the papers, my son?" asked the old man, who was evi-

dently greatly excited about the expedition. Hugh could sympathise with him—he had been deeply touched on the previous evening as he had listened to his story. He knew that this expedition amounted to a sacred duty on the part of the Sheik. He would not die happily until he had accomplished his aim, satisfied his honour by revenging himself on his enemies, and had compensated his heirs for the loss of his lands.

“I have gone through them, sir, and there are one or two questions I want to ask you,” replied Hugh, and as Ibn-el-Said bowed slowly in acknowledgment, he proceeded: “How many men do you think will actually be on guard at each well?”

“Not five score,” replied the Sheik. “For four weary years we have kept vigilant watch, my son, and the numbers have steadily dropped, as the fear of any possible raid has departed. At first the guard was kept up to the strength required by the Government, for both the Greek and the Emir Yusef had fears that I would act, but as the years have gone by without any untoward happening, and the allowance for the defence remains the same, the two thieves have conspired together to defraud the Government of the amount they pay for soldiers, and are doubtless laying much gold aside in consequence. Indeed, when we do operate, my son, thou wilt read, doubtless, that the wells were raided by numbers ten times the size of the actual men engaged.”

“Then the success of the project is obviously assured,” replied Hugh. “The only point that remains doubtful is how long it would take the manager on the spot to call in these special reserves. Window-dressing troops, you say, are always produced for inspection purposes?”

"They cannot be produced at all," replied the Sheik, with a glint of humour in his fine eyes. "All the reserves worth mentioning are my men, and will be members of the attacking force."

Hugh could not help laughing at the Gilbertian position, and as he ate the very excellent meal provided for him, he listened while the Sheik Ibn-el-Said outlined to him the details of the training of the troops at his disposal, their experience, the method of control, and his own ideas for the successful conduct of the various raids. When the meal was over, and not till then, the Sheik told Hugh that he would ride with him immediately to inspect the main body of two thousand horsemen, who were encamped at a place three hours' ride away, and, for the deception of outsiders, they were supposed to be holding a sports meeting, where every day certain events of horsemanship and marksmanship took place, all of which meant, in reality, training. Hugh saw that the old man had deliberately refrained from telling him of this before lest he should hurry over his meal, and though this was in itself a small thing, it added one more item to Hugh's already deep regard for the man. The Kaid Abdullah, he added, had already gone to the camp and would meet them there.

Breakfast over, they strolled out into the courtyard of the palace where four horses were standing, with two Arabs in attendance. The old man pointed to a magnificent chestnut mare, accoutred in Arab style with ornamental bit and bridle and an old-fashioned saddle.

"I know that thou art a horseman, my son," he said, "and I chose this pretty mare from Abdullah's stables for thee." Hugh, who was lost in admiration of the beautiful creature, was some seconds before he

answered him. He patted the nervous creature's neck and caressed the sensitive nostrils.

"I never saw a more beautiful animal in my life—she is perfect."

"She is thine—from this moment," replied Ibn-el-Said.

They mounted, and the Sheik, who revealed himself, as Hugh expected, an excellent horseman, led the way past the outlying houses, the flocks of poor-looking sheep, the groups of beggars not permitted in the town by reason of bad conduct, out past the mosque built by the pious Mahmoud-el-Tabir two hundred years ago, to celebrate his recovery from the plague, right out into the desert. The old man led steadily, without changing his direction to the right or to the left, across the monotonous sands. He rode a large roan stallion, and always kept just a half-horse-length ahead of Hugh. The two servants, less well mounted, remained some way in the rear. Very rarely did the old man speak, and when he did, it seemed merely out of courtesy. Eventually they saw in the distance a number of tents, and men and horses moving about. As they neared the encampment and were met by the Kaid Abdullah, Hugh noticed great activity. Horses were mounted and some sort of order formed, and by the time they actually entered the camp, the whole host had been lined up in a sort of mass formation on both sides, forming an open space into which the Sheik and Hugh rode. When they entered this open space, some order was shouted by commanders on both sides, and every man fired his rifle into the air, with deafening effect, by way of salute.

There was lacking the shining silver and brass of Western cavalry, but there was a certain efficiency

that was hard to ascribe to any particular factor of their appearance or equipment—and these latter left nothing to be desired—there was even a fanatical enthusiasm in these men's faces, and Hugh felt, as he rode slowly past each well-mounted, bearded figure, that these same men, who would willingly die in carrying out his commands, would never forgive him if he let them down. They were here to strike a blow for old Ibn-el-Said, whom they revered and whose cause they held just. He, Hugh Valentroyd, must go forward, there could be no drawing back now. As he concluded his inspection, Hugh determined, for better or worse, whatever the consequences, he would not enter half-heartedly into this enterprise, but would embrace the venerable old Sheik's cause and put his best work into making a success of it.

Hugh accompanied his host and his leader to a large tent set at some distance from the remainder. They had almost reached it, when the Kaid said:

"One rideth towards us rapidly," and in the distance Hugh could see a horseman galloping swiftly towards the camp. He rode straight up to the Kaid Abdullah, who spoke a word to him, then turned to Hugh.

"This telegram has come for you," he said, handing Hugh a folded paper.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A SHOCK FOR MOGRA

HUGH took the telegram, and unfolded it. It was long and in code, from the President. It was impossible for him to decode it there, as the code-book was with his other papers and property in Abdullah's palace. He explained the position to the Kaid, who said that as soon as they had refreshed themselves they would ride back, as the news contained might be important. The Sheik Ibn-el-Said was also anxious to return, so that Hugh could complete his plans. While they drank wine and ate hard flat cakes with pieces of unpalatable dried goat-flesh, Hugh asked:

"Where are the explosives stored?" and was answered that they were buried deep below the ruins of an old castle in a neighbouring oasis, always carefully guarded by Abdullah's men, and were ostensibly used to shelter a few workers in some oil borings he was supposed to be making there. Valentroyd determined to examine this explosive the next day, and in the meantime asked Mustapha, who had joined them, to pick out twenty men whose intelligence was such as to enable them to pick up rapidly the instructions he had to give them on explosives, and Mustapha promised to find twenty such men and produce them that night at sun-down at Abdullah's palace. Then Hugh, accompanied by the Sheik Ibn-el-Said and Abdullah, and escorted by their servants, rode back to the outskirts of Mosul, and

after washing the sand from his face, set to work decoding the long cable from the President. In half-an-hour he had completed the decoding and the message was plainly before him. It read:

"In reserve against possible, but only extreme need, I am sending by 'plane that which ensures victory. Try to do without it. Revelation of its being used would be ruinous to our present plans. Scotland Yard, as you know already, is suspicious, and an attempt has been made to try to trace you even now. Cable me fully when you have made your plans and then direct the person I am sending—he will obey, but not divulge nature of his instrument to you or anyone. See that he is properly and secretly accommodated. Extradition of Sylvia Peyton has been arranged, and I shall provide for her certain acquittal as I told you. 'Plane will remain with you till you are free, then you will proceed home immediately. Latinia worrying. Very good wishes.

"YOUR PRESIDENT."

Immediately Hugh wrote and coded a message, giving the President an account of his inspection and assuring him of his care to abide by the instructions given. Then he showed the Kaid Abdullah and the Sheik Ibn-el-Said the telegram, explaining to them the meaning of the part that affected them. The Kaid left Hugh and the Sheik together and went to make arrangements for the disposal of the twenty soldiers expected that night, at the same time taking the cable for his wireless operator to dispatch. After some talk with the old Sheik, during which Hugh elicited such information as he required that was not afforded by the maps and plans, he retired to think out the arrangements for the coup of the following week. By nightfall he had gone far towards working out a provisional plan, but before he finally settled on it, he

desired to see the ground for himself and also test the explosives. Sun-down saw the arrival of Mustapha with twenty picked men, all of whom spoke English perfectly, and Hugh devoted an hour to a simple lecture on the properties of explosives generally and the methods usually adopted in using a high explosive. A few questions at the end of his talk made it clear that he had intelligent and attentive listeners, and so the first day of the strange adventure ended. Very early the next morning, Hugh was afoot, and accompanied by the old Sheik and the Kaid, together with his twenty pupils, set off to ride to the oasis where the explosive was buried.

When this place was reached, the stout figure of the quartermaster appeared and greeted them, and Hugh, dismounting, accompanied him, the Sheik and Abdullah to some ruined walls half-buried in sand, which marked the site of what had once been a Saracen stronghold. At some distance a number of men were working at the boring operations which had been initiated by the Kaid, not so much in the hope of obtaining any oil, although the whole district was rich in oil deposits, but to enable him to mount an efficient guard over the explosives. The quartermaster indicated a place just inside one of the ruined walls, and two men began to dig. Having cleared about three feet of sand, they came to a series of large stone blocks, and under these were sheet after sheet of corrugated iron. When all this had been cleared away, a sort of crypt, or cellar, was revealed, and Hugh saw that the original building had been cunningly used for storing the T.N.T. and the top so carefully covered in that it looked merely like a sand-drift. Heavy cases lay on the stone floor of this cellar, and very carefully Hugh descended and

examined them. Each case contained drums of the deadly explosive, and two small cases contained detonators, while a barrel contained reels of commercial fuse. All these in turn were carefully examined by Hugh, who removed a length of the fuse and a number of detonators to make tests. Then he very carefully opened one of the cases of the T.N.T., first of all taking the precaution to clear everyone out from round about him. With infinite care he removed a drum, then shut the case, and ordering them temporarily to close the cellar up again, ascended with the drum in his hands. The next thing was to make a test, and that could not be done anywhere near the bulk lest the detonation might explode the lot, so carrying the drum himself, and handing the fuses and the detonators to one of the men, he consulted with the Kaid and the Sheik as to a suitable place to make the tests. After some conversation, they agreed on a place. It appeared that at a point half-an-hour's ride from where they were, there was a small patch of withered palm-tree stumps, in what had once been an oasis, but the well had dried, and the place altogether had an evil reputation.

Truly it looked sinister enough, Hugh thought; the palm-tree stumps were withered and old, no grass grew, and rocks jutted blackly here and there through the mounds of sand. After they had dismounted and Hugh had had a chance to look round, he selected a rock overhanging the dry well, but having no instruments to bore it, he decided to make the test in the well itself. On his instructions two of the men dug with their bayonets and made a sufficiently large hole of the required depth. Then Hugh very carefully opened the drum and removed a quantity of the T.N.T.,

putting it into an empty ration tin he had brought for the purpose. With infinite care he showed his twenty wide-eyed pupils every detail of the operation, fixed the detonator, and attached the fuse. Having buried the tin in the side of the well, and tamped it as well as possible with sand and stones, in the presence of all, he ordered everyone to ride off for at least a thousand yards, and when he had seen them all mounted, he lit the fuse and followed them. They had reached the place at a distance which Hugh deemed to be safe, and had waited for some seconds—indeed, Hugh, who had not timed the fuse exactly, but had merely reckoned twenty-four inches to the minute, had left about four feet, and he was beginning to think the T.N.T. was wrong in some way, when there was an appalling explosion—the very ground shook. Dense quantities of sand and stones mounted like a column capped by a cloud into the air. In the desert stillness the noise was like a hundred thunderclaps, and every horse reared and kicked, and, panic-stricken, tried to bolt. The men were no less shaken and even old Ibn called upon Allah to protect him.

When something like order had been restored and the horses quietened, led by Valentroyd, then returned to the oasis, where the terribly destructive powers of the T.N.T. were visible. A crater took the place of the well—a crater twenty feet across—and in place of the overhanging rock and the two palm-tree stumps was just sand. At the bottom of the deep crater a layer of rock was exposed, and even this was cracked and blasted. Old Ibn-el-Said, who had quite recovered from his shock, gazed upon the scene with satisfaction.

“Allah hath indeed delivered the Greek dog into my hands,” he said.

Hugh collected the remainder of the explosive which he had carefully buried some distance away, and the party proceeded home.

There followed two days of intensive training on the part of the "sappers" as Hugh humorously called his twenty pupils, and at the end of that time they treated the deadly explosive almost with contempt. They had thoroughly mastered the method of its use, and at the end of the second day they left to join the main body at a rendezvous three days' march away. Mustapha and his assistants were with the expedition, and only the Kaid, Ibn-el-Said and Hugh remained, waiting, with some impatience now, the arrival of the 'plane with the President's deadly weapon aboard.

Late on the night of the day that had seen the departure of the "sappers," the evening meal had been cleared away, and the Sheik and Hugh sat with their host, talking of the coming coup, when a servant entered and announced that an aeroplane was approaching, and that lights had been taken out for guidance. They walked out into the grounds. Outside the walls the black velvet of the desert night was pierced by four powerful lights set by arrangement at the four corners confining the safe landing ground, and out of the upper darkness, looking, Hugh thought, like nothing so much as a great night-bird, the giant 'plane swooped down, and lightly skimming the ground, sped a few yards against the light breeze and came to rest. The pilot and his passenger descended, and as the passenger approached the circle of light in which Hugh and his friends were standing, Hugh gazed again upon the dark, saturnine features of the Hawk.

"Good-evening, Mr. Valentroyd. Glad to see you.

Glad to get here—out of that noisy machine—letter here for you.”

Hugh introduced him to the Sheik and the Kaid Abdullah, and briefly the Hawk responded to their cordial greetings. They entered the room where the friends had been sitting, and the Kaid instantly summoned servants to bring food for the belated guest. The Hawk, who could not understand the language, nevertheless guessed that such preparations were afoot, for he turned to Hugh, and it was the first time the young man had ever seen him even slightly embarrassed.

“Mr. Valentroyd, they won’t make me eat rice and camel or anything like that, will they?” he inquired anxiously. Hugh laughed aloud, and the Hawk, seeing the Kaid laughing and even old Ibn-el-Said smiling, was reassured.

“I think you will enjoy your food all right,” said Hugh. “I’ve not seen a camel since I’ve been here.” The meal was served, and the Hawk took a little soup and fish, but he obviously did not care for them. When the large cauldron of mutton stew appeared, however, the Hawk’s little bright eyes lit up, and he began to enjoy himself silently. Hugh noticed that both the Kaid and the Sheik looked approvingly on. This was evidently a man whose views of food were their own. Hugh noticed that the hand-bag never left the Hawk’s side—indeed, he kept it between his feet the whole time he ate. After his meal, he retired, and only one reference did he make to his mission. As he left the room, following the servant who conducted him, he turned to Hugh, and glancing down at his bag, remarked:

“I’ve got it.” That was all, and without waiting for a reply, he was gone.

The next day was spent in a tour of the four oil wells, by air. Hugh carefully noted the approaches to each. Flying low, they could almost count the few soldiers dotting the almost empty barrack-yard in one case. In the others there seemed to be equally few. Hugh turned to the Hawk, and said:

"If it is necessary to use the bag you carry, how low must you fly?"

"This height is all right," was the brief response.

Having accomplished the tour of the wells, they next proceeded to the rendezvous where now the troops were waiting. Here they found all but the "sappers," who had not yet had time to arrive, but Hugh saw that the explosive had been moved, in accordance with his instructions, and the rest of the equipment necessary. The squadrons had now been sub-divided, and were formed into four independent bodies of a little over five hundred each, for there were now additional numbers since he had last seen them.

After leaving these and bidding farewell to Fazly, who was temporarily in charge, they mounted into the skies again and proceeded to the point of concentration for the ambushing troops. This was within easy distance of the pass in the hills, which was to be the scene of the attack on the wage escort. Here, also, all was well. Covered by skin tenting were two old eighteen-pounders.

On the way home they flew low over the pass which was to witness such strange proceedings, and Hugh saw that it was eminently suitable for an ambush. Carefully he checked the projected positions on his map, and found them correct. Then they proceeded home, where Hugh sent his daily cable to the President.

The letter he had received from the Hawk had merely

confirmed the previous cables he had had from his chief. In the excitement of the day's work Hugh had not much time to think of Sylvia, but his mind always returned to her as he lay down on his couch to sleep.

* * * * *

Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos was a very great man, and lived in a very great house, or rather a series of very great houses. He had, for instance, a large and palatial establishment at Basra, where he spent most of his time, for this position enabled him to proceed quickly to many of his oil undertakings in the hinterland. He had also an establishment at Athens, and a flat in London.

Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos was also a very rich man. He had not always been so, but he had been several times so, and then unpleasant things had happened to him. Once, there had been the little affair of the misunderstanding about the marine insurance, and the rapid series of accidents to a line of old ships that he was greatly interested in. The insurance company was German, and he had gone to Leipzig to fight the action, but the barbarous Huns had called him a swindler, and he had languished for two years in a German prison. He had kindly offered to supply the British Government with a large quantity of oriental fruits during the war, and delivered the first part all right. Then there was another unfortunate misunderstanding, and the Government lost a lot of money—they also lost sight of Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos.

Now he was firmly on his feet. By great cunning he had, with the assistance of the Emir Yusef, gained the richest oil concessions in the whole of the wide country between the Persian Gulf and Russia. There had always been a little difficulty about insurance, for

the companies seemed to fight shy of risks that involved the cunning Mogra—but still he was safe enough. He knew that there was independent gambling in the various portions of his properties. A calamity to his wells would make some men rich and the unfortunate insurers poor, and he personally—well, why worry about that—it wouldn't happen.

There came a day when Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos was sitting in his large and handsome library at Basra. His big, greasy-looking face was wreathed in smiles, he twirled his moustache and laughed until his body quivered like a jelly—for Mogra was a corpulent gentleman. He was reading a letter from a man whom he had taken in, and several passages of which appealed to his sense of humour.

"Dear! Dear!" said Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos, as the telephone rang. He took the receiver and listened to an excited voice at the other end which, when it was assured that Mogra answered, said:

"Couldn't get through before—all communications cut. Yesterday afternoon a force of Arabs attacked El Tab wells, beat the guard and demolished the workings."

Mogra grew purple with rage. The voice went on.

"Another force attacked the Nuerim wells, and again beat the guard, fired the premises and blew up the workings."

Mogra felt sick—the voice went on.

"Same thing happened at Daza. Here there was some fighting, but tremendously superior forces overcame the guard, the workings are demolished."

Mogra turned very white—the inexorable voice continued:

"At Yazab tremendous hordes of Arabs attacked

the wells, and after defeating the guard, blew up the whole place and fired the pipe line."

Mogra felt so ill that he scarcely took in what was being said, but there was still more.

"An armed attack with artillery ambushed the wage escort in El Daza pass yesterday afternoon, blew the cars to bits and took all the money. Are you there? Are you there?"

But Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos had fainted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DANGER AHEAD

THE great events, so carefully planned and so long anxiously awaited, were over, and a scene of feasting and revelry was taking place in the palace of the Kaid Abdullah. Even the beggars of bad conduct, whose lot it was to remain far outside the city, found that they had been remembered, for two of Abdullah's guards rode out to them with presents, including a sheep, some wine, bread in abundance and a little money. This was the best Sunday they remembered.

On the Friday, accompanied by the Sheik, the Kaid Abdullah, and the Hawk, Hugh had flown over the points of attack. First of all they went to the Pass of El Daza, where the ambushing forces were ready, and gave the signal appointed that all was well—a white robe outspread, but the wage escort had not yet arrived. On they flew to the various wells. In every case but one they were too late to see the actual operation, for the timing was simultaneous for each one; but in the case of the wells of Yazab, they were able to see the actual attack carried out. In this case Fazly commanded the attacking forces. Flying low and circling round, the watchers above saw over five hundred horsemen swoop down on the unsuspecting guard. Though a few shots were fired there appeared to be no fight. Dismounted figures were running hither and thither about the workings; a random shot told of

some guard sniping from a hidden position. Then Hugh saw his five attached "sappers" ride forward, dismount, and approach the workings. They still circled round until they could discern the five figures running swiftly for their horses, and then they saw the whole force gallop off. There was a delay of three minutes, during which the 'plane moved away; then an explosion which shook the very atmosphere. The air seemed to tingle and prickle. The 'plane rocked. A pillar of fire shot skywards. Where pumps and buildings had been there was what seemed to be a giant fountain playing, throwing for far around fragments of metal, wood, sand and shale. The destruction was complete! They flew off towards El Tab, but there was a mighty explosion before they reached it; the dense columns of ascending smoke spoke of success there. They turned towards Nuerim but, again, they were behind the event, and they returned to the Pass of El Daza. Here they were privileged to see the end of the quick action. Three cars—or what was left of them—were standing in the road. From two, little groups of men were issuing with upraised arms; from the centre one a machine-gun was firing. Two loud thuds betokened that the eighteen-pounders were in action. The firing of these was at point-blank range, but one of the shells, nevertheless, went wild. Hugh saw that the other got a direct hit on the centre car—and the battle was over. At the agreed rendezvous, by arrangement, they all met, and that night, under a desert moon, the last parade of the armed forces of the Sheik Ibn-el-Said was held, a large sum of money distributed and blessings liberally dispensed. Very touching was the picture of the venerable old Sheik, as he sat straight upright on his roan stallion, under the

pale light of the rising moon, his long white beard streaming in the night breeze. In tones charged with deep emotion he thanked his followers, and in their presence called upon his fathers to testify that justice had been done.

All the traces of the equipment—the field-guns and the shells—had been demolished with the explosive, and now it was Sunday, and Hugh and the Hawk were on the point of re-starting for London. They had rested a day to enable the pilot to overhaul the engine thoroughly preparatory to the long flight. In the courtyard of the palace stood the Kaid Abdullah, and beside him the Sheik Ibn-el-Said, who was to accompany them as far as Alexandria. After touching farewells, they parted, for a great friendship had sprung up between the Kaid Abdullah and Hugh, and the latter promised at some future date to return. The only person who was not affected was the Hawk. He stood there, still gripping his all-important hand-bag, which it had not been necessary to use.

“Thanks for your hospitality, sir,” was all he said, for he was not a man of many words, and soon they were mounting into the skies, and as the ’plane soared higher and higher and accelerated speed, Hugh thought that there was only the presence of Ibn-el-Said to show that the events of the last few days were not a dream. As the President had truly said, it was like a page from the Arabian Nights Entertainments, brought up to date by the use of modern instruments of warfare. Now the page had been turned down—the book closed again.

Hugh thought of the latest news he had had from the President—the news informing him that Sylvia had arrived in London and had appeared before the

Marlborough Street Magistrate. Eminent counsel had appeared, but the proceedings had been purely formal, only evidence of arrest having been taken, and, of course, she was still in custody. The question of bail could not arise on such a serious charge. Hugh loathed the idea of Sylvia in prison—it was torture to him. There was some mystery that was inexplicable to him in the fact that her handkerchief had been found in the dead jeweller's hand, but whatever the explanation of that terrible fact was, Hugh felt sure that Sylvia was neither directly nor indirectly responsible for such a horrible crime. As always, when he thought of Sylvia and her terrible position, he finally took refuge in the fact that the President, who had already given so many tokens of his power, had promised faithfully that no harm should befall her, and that he acquittal was certain. In support of this comforting theory was the undoubted fact that Hugh himself had had interviews with, and had obtained assurances from people whose standing and probity were beyond question, and that they would prove, when required, that Sylvia was away from the scene of the outrage at the time of its perpetration.

In due course the party arrived at Alexandria, where Ibn-el-Said insisted that they should stay the night at his house. Not sorry for the break in the long air journey, Hugh accepted the invitation on behalf of himself and the Hawk. The old man entertained them royally and parted with them the next day full of expressions of his gratitude.

The journey from Alexandria to London was without accident or important incident. They made the usual calls for rest and petrol, and the whole journey seemed to have been extraordinarily swift to Hugh,

when finally they landed at Croydon. Taking the car that was waiting, the Hawk and he drove to the Brick-Bat Club. Here a message was awaiting Hugh from the President, that if he arrived back in time he was to proceed to Halmene Towers, to dine with the chief, who was entertaining an important dinner party there. The time being then just after three o'clock, Hugh decided to return home first and then proceed to Halmene Towers in his own car. He intimated his intention to the Hawk, who was immersed in a large pile of correspondence that had accumulated in his absence, then he departed.

Arriving home, he opened the door with his own key, rather dreading an interview with James until he had dressed and prepared for his journey to Hampshire. But it was not to be. The old butler waylaid him on his rush through the hall to the staircase.

"Good-afternoon, James," Hugh said. "I didn't see you. I'm just going up to dress, I'll talk to you when I come down."

"Begging your pardon, sir," the old butler began, "I particularly want to see you for a moment, sir, before you disappear again." Hugh felt inclined to be angry, but the privileged old man's indignation was really humorous, and certainly his movements of the last few weeks had been, to say the least, mysterious, so with a sigh of resignation, he answered:

"Oh, all right, then, James, but for goodness' sake try to be brief. I'm in an awful hurry, you know."

"I do know, sir. You have been in an awful hurry for the last few weeks, sir, and I'm sure I don't intend to exceed my position when I beg to say, sir, that I wonder where this awful hurry is going to lead us all, sir."

"Now come along, James," Hugh coaxed. "I really can't listen to a lecture just now. What is it you want?"

"As you will, sir, as you will," sadly replied the old man. "I'm sure I don't intend to waste your time, sir. Were I not as well-trained as I am sir, by your late father, of such happy memory, I would be inclined to quote you the proverb, sir, which says, 'The swine will to his mire and the fool to his folly,' but as I said——"

"Yes, yes, I know," Hugh broke in impatiently, "but, as you say, you are too well-trained. Now let me know, please, what it is you want—at once."

"Well, sir, since you went away there have been happenings. The police have been here again, and the young person has been here again. The young person left a message and said she would call again to-night, but don't let me keep you, sir," and the old man, after arousing Hugh's curiosity, made as if to hurry off.

"Come here, James, and please don't act in this manner," said Hugh. "What did the police want? and to whom do you refer as the 'young person,' and what was the message?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, I thought you were in a hurry," said the malicious old fellow. "The police, sir, called several times and asked where you were and to what address I sent your letters. They were here this morning at ten o'clock. The young person, sir, is the young lady who called to see you one evening some weeks ago, when I told you, sir, that being old-fashioned, I had never known a young, unchaperoned——"

"And what was her message?" Hugh asked, again interrupting.

"She left it in this envelope, sir," replied James, holding out a letter.

"Then why the devil didn't you give it to me at first and save all this waste of time and talk?" asked Hugh irritably.

"Because you didn't ask me, sir." The old man fired his remark in tones of mock humility after Hugh as he ascended the staircase. In his room, Valentroyd opened the letter, and read the following lines, written in a strong, clear hand:—

"DEAR HUGH,—On my return from Marseilles, I learn that you have departed on some mission or other to the East, and are hourly expected back. I shall call upon you later to-night, but until I arrive, please be advised by me and make no attempt to see the girl we talked about on the yacht. Be sure about this. Very sincerely yours,

"EUNICE."

This, of course, could only mean that there was some danger in his attempting to see Sylvia Peyton. Danger to whom? To Sylvia or to himself? As a matter of fact, he had not thought of trying to see her. His first duty must be to go to Halmene Towers. Obedience—unquestioning obedience, that was his lot, and in any case, he felt that it would be much better to see the President before attempting to interview Sylvia. So hurriedly he changed. Then he wrote a note to Eunice, for James to hand to her, merely telling her that he had proceeded according to orders to a dinner-party, and would welcome her or a message from her any time after his return. He told her that he supposed that he would be at home first thing in the morning. Then, leaving the note with James, he entered his car and bade the driver proceed as quickly

as possible to Halmene Towers. On the way he went through the letters that had accumulated in his absence, then glanced through one or two copies of the *Times* that he had snatched up from his library table. He read the short account of the appearance of Sylvia before the magistrate, and noted with satisfaction that the eminent Sir Joseph Symes, K.C., M.P., had made an appearance for her. The President had evidently moved vigorously to secure so eminent a counsel, for Sir Joseph's appearances in the Criminal Courts were few.

Thus engaged, the time passed quickly, and it did not seem very long to Hugh before the chauffeur was sounding his horn for the opening of the lodge-gates at Halmene Towers. Hugh entered the large hall, and was obviously expected, for as soon as the butler saw him, he took charge of him. Having taken his hat and coat, he led him straight upstairs to the President's dressing-room, and there Hugh confronted once again the genial face of Viscount Halmene.

"Ah! my dear fellow! There you are. Well, well!" He greeted Hugh, shaking hands with him with one hand the while he clapped him affectionately on the shoulder with the other. "Be quick, Rogers, I want to talk to Mr. Valentroyd." The last remark was addressed to his valet, who dexterously and speedily finished his ministrations. Then Hugh gave the President a full account of the destruction of the oil wells and the raid on the wage escort. Lord Halmene laughed again and again as Hugh unfolded his tale. Before the latter could bring it to an end, however, a gong sounded in the distance.

"By Jove!" said the President. "That's the second gong—I must get down to attend to my guests. We'll

continue this most interesting conversation later. Look here, Valentroyd my boy, you'll stay the night, of course, and we'll slip up to my club sitting-room on the next floor after the rest have retired—about midnight—and finish this chat. I call it the club sitting-room because I use it for interviewing members when I want to be particularly private—it is right out of the way, you know."

"As a matter of fact, Mr. President," Hugh interrupted, "I particularly wanted to be back early tomorrow. I rather expected to see Miss Eunice de Laine, and——"

"Ha, ha!" laughed the President. "The seed's beginning to grow, is it? Well! Well! And a very charming girl she is, too. Sh! Never mind!" as Hugh sought to interrupt. "You can get back either in the night or as early in the morning as you like. Will that do? Right!"

"I wanted to ask you about Sylvia," said Hugh as they left the room together, but the President was evidently in a boisterously humorous mood.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed. "The man's a Mormon." Then as he saw Hugh looking a little hurt, he added, as they reached the main staircase: "Never mind. I'll tell you all about that to-night; in the meantime take my tip—she's as safe as the bank."

In the hall most of the guests had assembled, and the President introduced Hugh to many of them. There were two clergymen there, an admiral, a lady explorer, several members of the Diplomatic Service, an Indian Prince, and many others whose social position was beyond reproach. But the person whom Hugh was most surprised to see, deeply engrossed in conversation with a pretty young hostess who had been

the envy of the London season, was none other than the jolly American, Mr. Alfred K. Stokes, who had lost eight thousand pounds to the President on the *Falcon*. Hugh made a direct line for him, and as the American saw him approaching, his face lit up with smiles.

"Why, I guess this is just fine," he said, warmly shaking Hugh by the hand. "I've been trying to see you ever since I got to London. I'm real glad to see you, Val. Now we must have a yarn, boy, and you can tell me all the best news."

The man's cordiality was obvious and sincere. Hugh replied, also cordially, for he liked this hearty American. Promising to see him later, Hugh left him to take his partner in to dinner. He found that a famous sporting peeress had been assigned to him as his partner, and she kept up a racy conversation, chiefly confined to the hunting-field.

The dinner was a great success, and, after the ladies had retired, the male members consumed some of the President's '34 port. Then later they joined the ladies in the drawing-room. Presently the party broke up, some of the younger members dancing, while others played cards or billiards. Hugh got no chance of further talk with the American, who seemed to be in great demand, and at last he retired to his room about half-past eleven, and before twelve had reached the President's club sitting-room. Here he remained alone before the fire reading a copy of the *Tatler* that he found lying on the table. It was nearly one o'clock when the President arrived and apologised for his lateness.

"Now, my boy," he said, "finish the yarn." And lighting a cigar, he sat back comfortably in his arm-

chair, while Hugh finished the story of his adventures. When he had finished, Lord Halmene said:

"Well, my boy, it's just about the smartest bit of work I've come across. Now, I don't need to tell you that I've so manœvered things that I make a packet out of this affair. The hundred thousand, or whatever it was, that was in the wage escort is a mere flea-bite. I bought some oil shares and insured heavily, tremendously heavily, against possible disaster, through agents in four countries. Of course I am carrying old Ibn-el-Said, and the Kaid Abdullah. Now, you must let me do something for you."

"I thank you very much, Mr. President," rejoined Hugh, "but I really don't need anything—I have more than enough for my requirements. No squeamishness dictates my action in this case," he hurriedly continued, as he saw the President frown slightly. "Indeed, I quite embraced the cause of Ibn-el-Said, whom I consider a jolly fine old fellow. I am very glad to have been able to help him to bring that Greek rascal to book."

"Well, I don't like to see a man work for nothing" said the President, knocking the ash from his cigar. "But you must please yourself. What's that?" for the telephone bell had just rung. The President took the instrument and answered the call. Evidently there was something of moment, for Hugh saw his face grow stern as he listened.

"I shall attend to that at once," was all he said as he hung up the receiver. Then he turned to Hugh.

"Valentroyd," he said. "I'm ashamed to ask still further services of you, but a most deplorable thing has happened and only our swift joint action can put it right. You would, in any case, have been asked

to go to Latinia in a day or so; now you will have to go at once. We are reaching a crisis in the affairs of the Brick-Bat Club. In two days probably from now we are established for ever, firmly as granite—or irrevocably ruined. To save Sylvia Peyton, Valentroyd, I must stand. I am facing at this moment a ring of enemies, who are all working in unison and with all the forces of law and order behind them. There is one chance—I still think one chance. Will you go, immediately, to Latinia, and I'll keep this end up? It's you and I, Valentroyd. You and I. Will you go?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A VISIT TO SYLVIA

NEVER had Hugh seen the President so terribly in earnest. His strong face was sternly set, his lips firmly pressed together, his eyes narrowed and glinting—together a tremendous contrast to the laughing, urbane man who had met him earlier in the evening. Hugh wondered why the question of his going to Latinia at once should have been addressed to him in this manner—as a request, even as a great favour. True, there was the hint that, if Sylvia Peyton was to be saved, the President must be there to save her, and that was enough really to spur Hugh into action. But, in addition to this, the power of the secret death remained. Why was the President requesting and not ordering?

All this flashed through Hugh's mind rapidly, for there was barely a pause after the President spoke, before he answered, and, even as he uttered the words, the solution of the problem flashed across his mind. He was requested, and not ordered, because the President had a greater regard for him than anyone else in the motley crowd around him. He had proved himself absolutely to be trusted, and Lord Halmene, in his need, had not refrained from taking him into his confidence. There remained, of course, the power to order and, if necessary, to enforce, but the President hungered for loyalty without the coercive terror.

"Of course I'll go, whenever you consider it necessary," he said quietly. "I would have liked to see Sylvia before I went, and I would have liked to fulfil my promise to see Eunice de Laine, but if I can't, I must leave it until my return."

"You're a good chap, Valentroyd," said the President, and with a sigh of relief he leaned back again in his chair and smoked silently for several moments; then he continued: "I won't disguise from you that it is not, has not been, my intention to keep on the Brick-Bat Club indefinitely. That would be impossible. By the use of the most drastic measures, in a word, by the literal fear of death, I have kept the organization together, and I suppose I am to be congratulated on the fact that only in four cases has the last extreme been resorted to. But as I said, this cannot go on for ever. For myself, I am more than content to stop now, but, my boy, when you invoke the devil, the account is long. The club is far bigger than you dream of, and, before it can be dissolved, every member must be paid out, well paid out."

Again the President paused, and only his steady pulling at his cigar could be heard for several minutes.

"Now this invention—this secret death," he continued. "I am counting upon the revenues from that to settle the financial claims of all members, besides providing a reserve fund, known only to myself, for such as spend their 'corner' and come back at some later date for more. I think I would pay once more in each case, because I know how hard it is for some people to keep money, before resorting to the dread instrument that settles all claims swiftly. There are other sorts of payment, besides money, that some of the members will require, but these need not enter

the present discussion. The position to-day is this. We have had one-hundred-thousand pounds from the Latinia Government, and it is possible that we will get more. But I have just found that they have discovered in Latinia that I have tentatively approached the American Government through Stokes. That, by the way, is the reason I picked up Stokes. Not to win his few thousands. Stokes is in with people who can move things pretty rapidly on the other side of the Atlantic. Now the Latinian Secret Service have got some wind of this, and they simply must be kept quiet while I complete the American negotiations here in London. I have convinced Stokes and a representative of the American Government of the efficacy of the secret death. I killed a few dogs that were sent for destruction—got hold of them by squaring the man at the home. I did the poor brutes no dis-service, they died more quickly my way than his. Now, if you've had a chance to see the papers since your return, you may have seen that war is simply inevitable. Latinian policy has deliberately engineered a war. The Dictator's position depends upon keeping the whole country in a state of patriotic enthusiasm, and he intends to fight a sharp, successful war. The last ultimatum—for the terms of the notes he has issued amount to nothing less—expires in a week from now, and then, my boy, the fat will be in the fire. The Crekonian crowd are panicking and canvassing the Great Powers, the Red crowd are delighted, and within a month from now, mark my words, unless something totally unexpected happens, Europe will be lit up."

Again the President paused, but Hugh did not interrupt, and after mediating for a few seconds, he continued.

"My difficulty is this. I have demonstrated the invention to Count Radicati to his complete satisfaction, and there is no doubt that it is the certainty of getting hold of the instrument that has toned all their negotiations in the present crisis. They answered the whip beautifully for money—as I said, we have had one-hundred-thousand pounds out of them and we can get more—and no wonder. You must understand, Valentroyd, that this instrument cannot fail to revolutionise warfare. Think for a moment, death coming suddenly, certainly, without apparent cause, and leaving no trace in its victims that could not be taken for ordinary heart failure. You see the importance of it? Now then, the Latinian Government looked me up in the stud-book. Found me an English Peer. Later they turned you up, and were eminently satisfied. The result was they took a chance. Paid money at our request, without much demur. Now the position has changed. We have put them off with tale after tale, and they have got themselves into such a position, relying upon our promise to deliver the 'goods,' that they cannot, with honour, retract.

"What is the result? The result is that a cable, in a special code that I have arranged with Count Radicati to use, has arrived at the club for me, which practically threatens that, unless delivery is effected within three days, they will inform our Government. Now in view of the fact that I intend actually to sell the invention to our own Government, that does not seem so serious, at first sight; but examine the matter a little more closely. There is all the difference in the world between selling in a forced market, and in an open one. Supposing the Latinian gang were to inform, don't you see the impetus it gives to old Overtley,

Bethume, and all that lot at Scotland Yard? They would put swarms of detectives to watch us, swarms like locusts, and there is a definite limit to the number of men you can account for without detection. No, the answer to the problem is for you to go and keep the Latinians quiet for at least a week, and in the meantime I will complete my American sale, and perhaps secure a 'Red' deposit, then open negotiations here, and get my price all round. Don't you agree?"

"The whole position seems to me terribly involved," replied Hugh. "But I have no doubt you are right. Anyway, I agree to go at once if you want me to."

"Yes," replied the President. "That's the thing, my boy, that's the thing. Now, what's this about wanting to see Sylvia Peyton? I don't see any particular reason why you shouldn't. You can get permission to visit her at Holloway Prison. I have been several times. The only thing you have to remember is that she is a prisoner and every word you say is probably carefully noted by a warden. You must be very careful about that. Now, I know you must be anxious to see her. Supposing you slip up to Holloway in the morning, and leave immediately afterwards by air for Latinia, will that suit you?"

"Certainly," replied Hugh, "but Eunice distinctly writes that I must not." He handed the President the letter he had received from the girl, and the chief read it with apparent perplexity.

"I don't pretend to know what Eunice is driving at," he said with a smile. "But I'm just a little afraid that she would rather you went to see her than that you went to see poor little Sylvia. Mind you, she may have a good reason, but I don't see it, and if there was a valid reason why you should not go, it was her manifest duty

to report that to me, and she certainly has not done so. My advice to you is to get back to your place in town as early as you can, wait in a reasonable time for Eunice, and hear her reasons why you should not visit Sylvia. Then decide for yourself whether to visit the gaol or not. A 'plane will be waiting for you at Croydon, from ten o'clock on, to take you to Latinia. Don't be any later than twelve noon in starting, and I'll wire you instructions fully in code to the Paris Aerodrome. That will give me time to think out your best line of action at the other end."

After some further conversation, the two men separated. Hugh, finding that the hour was very late—nearly three o'clock, and that his chauffeur had been accommodated in the servants' wing—decided not to travel through the night, but left instructions for his car to be ready by seven o'clock next morning, and to be called himself at six-thirty. Then he retired.

Promptly at the time appointed he was called, and it took him some moments to thoroughly waken, but the calling was persistent, and, as recollection came to him of the work before him, he aroused himself, took his tea, which the valet had brought, and quickly bathed and dressed himself. After a speedy breakfast, he got into his car which was already waiting, and by ten minutes past seven was on his way to London. Arriving home, he inquired of James if there had been any callers and asked for his letters.

"Just the usual, sir," declared the old man.

"What do you mean—the usual?" Hugh asked.

"Just the police and the young person, sir," gravely replied old James, what time he blinked through his watery eyes to see how this cut, which he had thought

out very carefully, would lash his master. To his mortification, Hugh laughed outright.

"Very good, James," he said, "and what did they all say?"

"Chief Inspector Overtley said he would call to-day, about two o'clock, sir, and he hoped you could make it convenient to be at home then."

"Well, I can't," said Hugh. "Go on. What is the other message?"

"Here, sir." The old man held out a letter, which Hugh took and opened. It was from Eunice, who said she had been ordered out of town and, therefore, regretted she would be unable to see him that morning, but reiterated her previous strong warning, not to try to see Sylvia.

Hugh was in a quandary. He longed to see Sylvia, and even had the President's permission to see her, and yet there was this warning from Eunice, whom he liked very much and trusted, which could not now be explained. However, he decided to go to Holloway Prison and seek an interview with Sylvia. Not wishing to drive there in his own car, which would have afforded a dainty tit-bit for due mastication between his chauffeur and James, he walked along the square and hailed a taxi, and directed the man to drive to Holloway Prison. Arriving there, he entered the grim gateway and sent in his request to see Sylvia Peyton, filled up a form and signed a book, then waited in a small white-washed waiting-room, seated on a bare form with various other visitors.

"Visitor for Sylvia Peyton," came the words presently, and Hugh rose and followed the wardress who had spoken them. He was conducted to a cubicle a little bigger than a telephone-box, with white-washed

sides. Behind him was no door, and he noticed that there were more than a dozen such cubicles. A wardress patrolled up and down. In front of him was a square of close wire-netting and beyond was another square of metal gauze, set six inches from the wire-netting. It was difficult to see in this place, but when his eyes had accustomed themselves to the dim light, he saw on the other side a pale, wan face, and though he had expected to be shocked when he saw her, yet the shock was greater than he had imagined.

"Sylvia," he murmured.

"So you've come to see me?" The little face was bravely smiling and the eyes were shining through tears.

"Yes, yes," Hugh said. "I couldn't come before—I was away. Ah! I'm certain that this awful ordeal will soon be over for you, Sylvia. You are quite safe at the trial, but I do wish we could do something to get you out now."

"Yes, I know I shall win at the trial—but why have you come?"

"Oh, Sylvia, need you ask. Because I love you, you have never been out of my mind. I have suffered tortures——"

"Tortures in case Eunice found out you were thinking of me?" There was misery in the little voice.

"What on earth are you talking about, Sylvia?" Hugh asked. "You know there is no one in the world that I think about except you."

"I know that you are well able to comfort yourself when I'm away—through circumstances I simply couldn't control," she rejoined.

"I really don't know what you are talking about, Sylvia. I only know that you are torturing me when

you talk such nonsense. What *do* you mean, darling?"

"Oh, don't add denial to it, please," said Sylvia. "I know. I didn't try to find out, God knows. It came to me freely enough, as all bad news does."

"But what came to you? What have I done? Listen, Sylvia, will you please believe me. I am terribly in earnest. I have been true to you in thought, word and deed, and have nothing, absolutely nothing, to reproach myself with."

"What earthly reason can you have for coming here to open up old wounds, Hugh? I don't reproach you, at least I've tried not to, but you might have let me know. Of course you couldn't; could you? You didn't know where I was. No, I don't blame you for that. I always knew somehow that Eunice would take you from me. But, oh, you have no right to come here and rake it all up again. Haven't I suffered enough?" and Sylvia relapsed into a fit of crying. Once or twice the wardress passed and glanced curiously in, but she was unconcerned. Doubtless she saw many such sights in that palace of tears. When Sylvia had to some extent recovered, Hugh said:

"Now, Sylvia, there's some terrible tangle here. Tell me exactly of what you accuse me."

"Why go into it? You must know it is awful for me to repeat the story. I mean your affair with Eunice, and your marriage to her at Malta, and——"

"My what? My what?" Hugh exclaimed, and his obvious sincerity was apparent to the girl.

"Time's up," the wardress was calling.

"You must wait a moment or so—this is an important conversation," said Hugh. "Sylvia——"

"Time's up," the wardress repeated mechanically,

taking Sylvia by the arm, and as she was meekly walking away, Hugh's fury rose.

"Bring that girl back," he demanded. "How dare you assault her in my presence? Take your hand off her arm."

"The time is up, sir." Hugh turned to confront another severe female in dark-blue with a chain of keys hanging from her belt.

"I want to speak to that lady," said Hugh. "A most important matter had arisen, and the woman on the other side removed her before I could finish what I had to say—it is disgraceful. I shall make a complaint."

"That's right, sir. Make a complaint," said the woman complacently. "Direct it either to the Governor or the Prisons Department of the Home Office."

"I certainly will," Hugh replied, and in fury left the prison. But after a while, his anger cooled down. No useful purpose, he reflected, could be served by making a complaint. After all, he supposed, the officials were doing their duty. But the whole interview with Sylvia had been tragic. Was her mind going? He, married to Eunice! What a strange delusion! Was it possible that Eunice had deliberately told her that, and was this the reason why she had warned him against visiting Sylvia? He could not accept that. It was such a stupid lie—so easily found out. Nevertheless, he wished he could find Eunice, so that he might tell her of his visit, and ask her help in straightening out this unfortunate misunderstanding.

He loathed leaving London with this gap between himself and Sylvia, but he was pledged to go and had a clear sense of the importance of his journey to Latinia. So, with a heavy heart, he set out for the aero-

drome and presently was in the air on the first stage of his journey. Immediately after he left, there came a frantic telephone call to the aerodrome. Had Mr. Hugh Valentroyd left yet? When? Then after a pause—Could the speaker get a 'plane to cross to Paris immediately—a very swift 'plane? Expense need not be spared. He could? Then he would be along in half-an-hour.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

RADICATI EXPLODES

HUGH arrived in Paris, and immediately inquired for the President's wire, which he got, then thrust it into his pocket to decode on the next stage of his journey. As he took his lunch in the restaurant, he wrote a short letter to Sylvia, emphasising his statement of the morning, that he was at a loss to understand what she meant by his marriage to Eunice de Laine, but he carefully avoided discussing either the case with which she was concerned or making any reference to the President. Just before he left for the South, a small two-seater 'plane arrived, from which a short, foreign-looking man alighted. The stranger walked over towards where Hugh was standing but made no attempt to speak to him. Hugh, however, had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being closely observed. The journey continued and, when they were well on the route, he opened the President's cable and commenced to decode it. The message was long. It read:

"Inform Radicati that through the illness of the scientist concerned, there has been a regrettable, but quite unavoidable delay. Within seven days all will be complete, and delivery effected. Extra caution has to be observed, because the Secret Service are already suspicious, having followed your last visit to Latinia, and it is impossible for me to reach the laboratories except by devious routes. Whilst I am quite prepared to go on, on the terms previously agreed, in principle, they will have to be varied to this extent. That, in addition

to the one million pounds sterling to be paid when one thousand instruments are complete, and tested, in Latinia, I shall require a small royalty in perpetuity and an additional sum of one hundred thousand pounds, payable now, before we proceed any further, for the scientist. I cannot help this. I am in the hands of the inventor, who says that this is his life's work, and he has been swindled before. No promises of mine are sufficient, he insists on that amount down. So you must arrange to get Latinian Bonds for one hundred thousand pounds to be deposited in London for discount in three days. No later. I will instruct further, in response to your cables. Good wishes.

"YOUR PRESIDENT."

Hugh viewed this cable with alarm. Already one hundred thousand pounds had been transferred from the Latinian Treasury to the President's bank, and here was a demand for a similar amount, at a time when the Latinian authorities were more than perturbed at the non-completion of the President's bargain—a bargain which he, Hugh Valentroyd, had taken his part in arranging. He feared to meet the old Count Radicati. They reached the second stage of their journey while Hugh was still thinking over the unpleasant position. When they were ready to take the air again, the pilot drew his attention to a small machine that was just arriving.

"That's the machine we left, just arriving in Paris," he said. Hugh looked, and recognised the little foreigner who had shown such a keen interest in him at the last stop. Instinctively he knew he was being followed. The pilot, who appeared to be specially reserved for the President's requirements, had carried Hugh back and forward to Mosul, and they were very friendly, so Hugh decided to confide to some extent in him.

"Look here," he said. "I have an idea that we are being followed by that small 'plane, and I am carrying something rather important. It would be against the interests of my Chief if we were to be followed."

"That's what I thought when I spoke," replied the pilot. "I also am a member of the Brick-Bat Club." Hugh looked curiously at him as he said this, yet, he reflected, there was nothing really remarkable in the fact. This pilot had taken part in so many, and so strange adventures, that it would not have been reasonable to expect anything less. Still, it made things easier to be certain of his discretion.

"What do you think we can do to shake him off?"

"I'll shake him off all right," the pilot said shortly, and once again they were in the air and away. The course was maintained for some way, then, Hugh thought, they seemed to double back, and instead of flying over the Mediterranean, they were flying over land. Night fell, and Hugh dozed, for he was tired. He had only snatched three hours' sleep on the previous night, and the day had been full of disappointment and anxiety. He was awakened by the downward movement of the machine, and when he looked out, he saw the night flares of an aerodrome. They had arrived at the capital of Latinia. Hugh alighted, and approached the Customs shed, when he was met by two of the officials, who asked for his passport. As soon as they had read it, one of them saluted, and said:

"You have been expected for some hours, sir. A car awaits you."

The man, though Latinian, spoke in English with hardly a trace of accent, then conducted Hugh to a large car beside which two men were standing. One wore the uniform of a Latinian staff-officer of Major's

rank. The other was a civilian. The Customs officer spoke a few words to these two in Latinian, whereupon the officer saluted Hugh and the civilian politely raised his hat.

"You are Signor Valentroyd?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Hugh.

"Permit me, signore, to introduce Major Coderna, and I am Victor Ricciocci, of the Secretariat of the Foreign Affairs Bureau. We bid you welcome, signore, and are ordered to bring you at once to the Palazzo Radicati."

Hugh thanked them, entered the car, and was driven rapidly away, without any Customs formalities whatever. On the way the military officer was silent, but the Foreign Office official talked away pleasantly, and showed a considerable knowledge of English affairs, and particularly of English sport. It appeared that this pleasant young man had for some time been attached to the Latinian Legation in London, and had acquired a great liking for the English game of Rugby football, which he had taken great pains to popularise in Latinia—apparently with very little success.

Soon they arrived before the ornamental portico of a magnificent mansion, and here the car stopped, and the military officer stepped out. Hugh followed, and together the three ascended the steps. The huge double doors were thrown open, and Hugh found himself in a spacious hall, furnished in Latinian style. Old suits of armour stood around the walls, and, because the electric lighting was dim, the shadows cast by these relics of the martial prowess of members of the house of Radicati, were fitfully lit by the firelight—for a tremendous fire of logs burnt in an open fireplace. Across this great hall Hugh was led, and up an oak staircase

that had made many a Chicago meat king mad with envy. At the head of this staircase an old man met him. The latter was introduced by the secretary as the Chamberlain of the Palazzo Radicati. This dignified old personage now took Hugh in charge, and the latter's two acquaintances departed, promising to see him later. Along a corridor and up another staircase the old man led him, until at last he stopped before a door, which he threw open.

"This suite has been apportioned to you, signore," he said. "I will send a valet immediately, and dinner is at eight. It is now ten minutes after seven." The old man bowed politely and withdrew.

Hugh looked round the room into which he had been ushered, and found it to be a well-appointed, large sitting-room, with two windows, apparently, that were now heavily curtained. Crossing the room, he opened a communicating door, and entered a handsomely-furnished bedroom. The carpets were thick and beautiful—of Persian hand-loom manufacture. The bed was Venetian, with three steps up to it at both sides and at the end. The head was set against the wall under a massive canopy.

A light knock came at the door, and a valet entered, carrying his bag. Hugh gave him the key, and the man proceeded to unpack, while Hugh opened a further door which gave access to a beautifully-equipped bathroom, the walls and sunk bath were all of white marble, the tap fittings silver. Certainly, Hugh thought, the old Count knew how to live luxuriously. By the time he had dressed, the gongs were sounding for dinner, and he rang the bell, requesting the servant who answered to direct him to the hall. As he descended the great staircase, he recognised the venerable figure of his host

Count Radicati, who instantly came forward, hands outstretched in cordial welcome.

"Ah, my friend," he said. "Welcome to the house of Radicati. I hope my people have looked to your comfort?" On being assured that this was so, he continued:

"To-night is a night of social importance here, my friend. To-morrow we will deal with the affairs that are so urgent, but tell me, my friend, do you come with satisfactory tidings?"

Hugh thought with alarm of the request for the one hundred thousand pounds and the further procrastination.

"I hope you will consider my news satisfactory—I certainly think you will."

"Good, my friend, good. Then to-night let us be merely light-hearted people, all gathered together to enjoy the society of each other, forgetting that at the frontiers the war dogs are braying and straining at their tether ropes. Now, you are to take in the Princess Pamona de Medici to dinner—she is charming. Come, I will make you acquainted."

The old man led him through the throng of guests, stopping here and there to introduce him to various distinguished people. Finally he stopped beside a tall, dark Latinian girl, whose beauty made her the centre of women's envy in every capital in Europe.

"I want you, Pamona," said the old Count, "to meet and be very nice to my excellent friend, Captain Hugh Valentroyd, of London." The girl laughed as she replied.

"Am I not always nice then? What must I do to be considered very nice, Captain Valentroyd?"

"Only one thing," replied Hugh. "Don't follow the

bad example of our good host in using the title Captain. I hung that up with my sword, nor do I wish to pick either up again."

"Signor Valentroyd is modest," laughed the Princess. "Is that why you brought him to me, Count? A modest man in Latinia since the Dictatorship! Fancy that, Count, and then they say that miracles have ceased!"

"Hush, girl, hush," said the old Count, half-seriously and with a look round. "Politics are—what is the English word. Oh, I know, 'taboo,' at my dinners, and, if you would take the advice of an old fool, should be taboo always with ladies, Pamona. Entertain him, instead, by telling him of the successes with the men and failures with the women of America that you experienced during your tour there."

The Count turned to Hugh. "Don't look too long into her eyes, my friend," he said. "No Indian carried half as many scalps round his belt as she carried round her pretty-gowns."

Before the Princess had time to reply, the second gong sounded and the party went in to dinner. The meal was a very enjoyable one to Hugh, the food excellent, and his companion sparkling. He had the Princess almost entirely to himself. Several times she tried to pump him as to the reason of his visit, and he saw that she, though very charming, was possibly a very dangerous person to confide in. She shamelessly divulged to him things that she frankly admitted had been told her in strict confidence by men high in the Diplomatic Service of her country. Just before the ladies retired, she startled him by saying, in her jolly, airy way:

"Isn't it funny, Mr. Valentroyd, when you come to

think of it? Here you and I are sitting, quite good friends, and no cloud seems to be on the horizon—judged by ordinary appearances—yet by this time next week, it would be accounted a crime, almost for us even to meet. By that time, war will have been declared, the Press of both countries raving at each other, and the remaining countries will be deciding which side to back. I'm going to run a hospital—so if you get captured, and promise to be a good patient, I'll nurse you. Will you like that?"

Hugh was too astonished to reply for a second, and before he thought of anything suitable to say, she had risen and left the room, in response to the signal of the hostess. Pleading fatigue from his journey, Hugh retired early, indeed, immediately after dinner, and wrote out a long cable to the President, in which he described the last remarks of the Princess.

He slept well, and the next morning rose thoroughly refreshed. His breakfast was served in his room, and immediately after it, he descended the stairs and asked for his host. He was told that the Count had already left for the Bureau of Foreign Affairs, and had left instructions for him to be escorted there by a young secretary whom Hugh had not before met.

Count Radicati was seated at his desk, and with him was the Signor Victor Ricciocci whom Hugh had met the previous night. When Hugh entered, the Count rose, and, with a slight gesture of his hand, dismissed Ricciocci, and beckoned his guest to a chair, then said:

"Now, my friend, at last we can talk. You have brought, of course, the all important experimental set with you?"

"No," replied Hugh. "I have not, but I have come to explain the cause of the delay and to assure you of

the speedy carrying out of the arrangements, when the required conditions are fulfilled." He stopped, and the Count, whose face showed acute disappointment, and some considerable annoyance, said:

"I understood you to say last night that I might place a satisfactory interpretation on your visit, signore. Will you be good enough to explain fully the present position."

Hugh then entered into a long statement, according to the President's instructions, and, as he talked, the old Count's impatience became more and more marked, until, when he got to the demand for another hundred thousand pounds, the old diplomat exploded. His face was red with fury and his fine eyes flashed fire as he thumped the desk before him.

"A million plagues on the man of science, and on the Viscount Halmene," he roared. "Do you understand, signore, that the week you speak of is impossible? Do you understand that twice we have given Viscount Halmene fifty thousand pounds? Promises—definite pledges—have been given. You were to have delivered the experimental set days ago—even weeks ago. You have done nothing. What have we seen for our money? Three dogs killed! Yes! Three dogs killed! Pah! it is monstrous, signore, monstrous!"

Shaking with indignation, the Count stopped, and wiped his brow, gazing the while at Hugh, who sat there helpless, and silent.

"Do you not realise the enormity of your offence, Signor Valentroyd? The offence of the Viscount Halmene and yourself?"

"I regret your inconvenience, Your Excellency," replied Hugh, quietly, and with dignity. "I express also the regret of Lord Halmene, but I cannot go be-

yond the statement I have already made. In this matter Lord Halmene is not a free agent. He is entirely dependent upon the scientist, who is the inventor. It is not my desire to argue with you; much less do I presume to advise you, but it must be apparent that in the case of a particularly valuable invention like this, the ultimate cost of which is going to be many times the amount now asked for, and the value to the holder simply incalculable, that it is surely no great sacrifice to deposit a further portion of the purchase money. It is not inconceivable, either, that the inventor should ask for substantial guarantees that he is to be paid."

The Count had listened with rising impatience, but he waited until Hugh was done; then he said:

"You deliberately miss the whole point, signore. My charge is one of bad faith. Upon the promises of two men—men we had every right to believe to be men of honour—we embarked upon a line of policy. That policy depended for its success upon those promises being implemented by the delivery of certain things in a certain time. The time is long past, delivery is still awaited, and catastrophe—positive catastrophe—is possibly the price of my faith in you and your friend, Lord Halmene."

As he said the last words, His Excellency trembled. In grim earnestness the old face, with its large, aquiline nose and fine eyes, now glinting with rage, resembled some great bird of prey. Hugh thought it reminded him of a wounded condor he had once seen. Presently the Count rose and, as he was leaving the room, said:

"You will have the goodness to excuse me, signore."

For twenty minutes Hugh sat there undisturbed; then the Count returned, and said:

"His Excellency the Dictator will see you in person."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE PRESIDENT REPLIES

ALL sorts of thoughts had passed through Hugh Valentroyd's mind while Count Radicati was absent from the room. That he was consulting someone was obvious, but Hugh had not been prepared for the announcement that he was to meet the Dictator himself. If he had wanted evidence as to the importance of his mission, here it was. In common with most people, Hugh had often wondered what manner of man the Dictator was, and he would have deemed it an interesting experience to meet him, but he knew that his present interview was likely to be an unpleasant one. The Dictator had a name, that he took care to live up to, for thoroughness—thorough unscrupulousness his enemies called it—and there were many of the latter. He had rescued his country from internal dissensions, stamped out Communism and Anarchy with an iron hand, and, to do him justice, by a system of rigid control, had increased the industrial efficiency of Latinia to such an extent that it ranked now as one of the great producing countries of the world.

But it was when the Dictator entered the realm of foreign politics that his performance was lamentable. He made no secret of his ambitious desire for expansion—expansion obviously at somebody's expense. He had cast envious eyes on the North African territory of a powerful neighbour, but a strong and almost united

outburst in the European Press had convinced him that the time for that was premature. Nevertheless, from time to time some particularly wild speech delivered by him had set the chancelleries of Europe humming with excitement. There was one school of thought that had long since treated the outbursts of the Dictator as merely sops to the excitable temperament of his countrymen, calculated to make him the idol of the Pan-Latinian party, which, indeed, he was. But there was another school—and this included the most experienced diplomats and the keenest students of international politics—which viewed the Dictator's progress with increasing alarm. Recent events had more than justified this school of thought. A small incident, of no particular significance, had occurred on the Chekonian frontier, and the Dictator's handling of the situation had been so bellicose that war was more than a possibility.

The Dictator seemed to be putting every obstacle that he could in the way of a reasonable settlement. The war clouds were gathering ominously, and the Dictator, working night and day, was seeing only the most important personages. Yet now he was going to give an audience to Hugh Valentroyd! Small wonder that Hugh's heart quickened its beat as he followed the old Count through the wide, vaulted corridors of the Bureau of Foreign Affairs out into the sunshine where the Count's motor-car was waiting.

Politely standing aside, Count Radicati bade his guest enter the car, then followed him. The footman closed the door, and sprang to his seat beside the driver, and the car sped swiftly to the Palazzo Rampolla—the building on which all the eyes of Europe were centred—the seat of the Dictator of Latinia. As the

car approached the door, Hugh saw that sentries guarded the entrance, and, as the Count and he passed up the steps, they presented arms respectfully. Various commissionaires in the corridors saluted the Count as he walked straight to a room on the first-floor. Here he knocked twice, and, answering some voice within, entered. A small man was sitting at a desk in a large, sumptuously-furnished room, and bowed as they entered. The Count introduced him to Hugh as the Senatore Barroggi, then himself passed through a door into an adjoining room, leaving the Senatore and Hugh together. The Senatore offered Hugh a cigarette, and began talking to him about the production of an English play which had just had a very successful run in the Latinian Capital. He had scarcely begun, however, to give Hugh an outline of his impressions when the door opened, and the Count appeared and beckoned to Hugh to follow him. Through two doors, separated by about three feet from each other, they passed, and then Hugh was in the room of the Great Dictator himself. A magnificent desk stood in the center of the apartment, its four corners supported by exquisitely carved lions. An equally elaborate bureau stood beside one of the panelled walls, and several large leather chairs were set beside the desk. Before a high carved mantelpiece, his feet astride on a leopard skin mat, stood the Dictator himself.

Curiously Hugh gazed at this remarkable man, who certainly looked the strong man he was supposed to be. About five feet nine in height, his shoulders broad, his head large, and with his face clean-shaven, he was in expression Napoleonic. His hair was a little thin and was oddly disarranged in front, as if he had a habit of pulling the forelock of it. But it was his eyes and

his jaw which fascinated Hugh. Cold piercing and hard were the eyes of this man, and his jaw was as if it were chiselled out of solid marble. As he entered, Hugh bowed—he did not mean to—he did it involuntarily. The Dictator nodded—slightly. Count Radicati moved forward until he stood at the side of the Dictator.

“This is Signor Hugh Valentroyd, of London, Your Excellency,” he said. “Signor Valentroyd, His Excellency Signor Limpetini, Prime Minister of Latinia.”

“You were to deliver an instrument—where is it?”

The Dictator spoke in English. His words came quickly, impatiently, and as he spoke his hard, cold eyes pierced Hugh through and through.

“I have explained to the Count Radicati——” began Hugh, but the Dictator interrupted him.

“Yes, I know—I have heard the explanation, but we don’t want explanations; we want the instrument, where is it?”

“As I explained to the Count it can be delivered only in the circumstances and under the terms I have stated,” replied Hugh, who was beginning to recover from his first nervousness.

“You are quite wrong, Signor Valentroyd; we get what we want here—we have a way of getting it. You have had one hundred thousand pounds to cover any initial expenses already. It is a large sum. When the instruments are made according to the formula that you will deliver now, you will get the remaining million English pounds that was contracted for. There will be no question of what you call royalties. There is no provision for royalties in Latinian law. Sit at that desk, signore.”

The last words were thundered out, and the Dictator put a hand imperiously forward in the direction of the desk near which Hugh was sitting.

"Now," said the Dictator, "take paper and write down the formula. Quickly, please—my time is limited."

"Your Excellency, I do not know the formula," Hugh quietly replied.

"Write the formula!" Terribly shone the hard eyes, the heavy jowl seemed to protrude more than ever. The Dictator took a step forward, his attitude threatening, menacing.

"I am very sorry," said Hugh; "I regret I cannot obey Your Excellency, I have stated the simple truth—I do not know the formula."

"Do you seriously think," thundered the Dictator, "that you can come here and defy me? Do you think you and your partner, Lord Halmene, can come and take a hundred thousand pounds, and by way of carrying out your pledged word, simply come here making stupid excuses and impudently asking for another hundred thousand. Do you think us mad?"

"Your Excellency is aware under what circumstances the further amount is asked for," replied Hugh. "I would presume to correct Your Excellency on one point, and that is that I am not Lord Halmene's partner, merely his friend. I am not in his confidence with regard to the nature of the instrument. I merely acceded to his wish in coming here."

"I take it you share in the—shall I say spoils?"

"No," replied Hugh shortly.

"Then why are you here?" An incredulous expression was on the Dictator's face.

"Because Lord Halmene asked me—that's all."

"Why did you undertake what must have been clear to you was a dangerous mission if you were not financially interested?"

"I repeat, simply because my friend, Lord Halmene, asked me. He said there was danger of himself being followed or something. I am simply not in a position to give any information at all, Your Excellency," replied Hugh with such sincerity that it seemed for a moment that the Dictator believed him. The next second, however, his face hardened:

"I don't believe you. You write that formula down now. You will find my room a more comfortable place to write in than the State Prison." This was no idle threat, Hugh felt. The Dictator's "strong" methods were notorious. Desperate, Hugh played a final card.

"You can do what you like," he said, rising from his chair. "You are the Prime Minister and Dictator of this country. I am merely a visitor—you have no difficulties in the way there, but I'll tell you this much. In three days or a week or whatever it is, if you treat me badly, you'll get the shock of your life. For not only will you not get the instrument of nameless death, but you'll have it used against you."

As Hugh finished, the three figures presented a remarkable tableau. Hugh, whose courage had been born of despair, was trembling with excitement, his hands tightly clinched. He ignored Count Radicati and gazed unflinchingly at the Dictator. The latter looked as if he were about to have an apoplectic fit. It would be safe to say that he was experiencing something that he had thought he had left behind for ever, in the days of his obscurity. He was accustomed to personal attacks in the newspapers of other countries—he did not allow that in his own—and he was even accustomed to

attacks upon his life. But to be defied, even positively threatened in his own palace! The thing was almost inconceivable. Fury was probably uppermost in the emotions that were gripping him, but there was also shock, and just a trace of apprehension. He stepped forward until he was within a foot of Hugh. Old Count Radicati was the only man who uttered a word—and that not coherently. He called upon the saints to witness the terrible outrage. He kept glancing upwards as if he expected the heavens to fall—but they did not. Anxiously, fearfully, he gazed from one to the other of the silent combatants. He was out of the battle. The silence was broken by the Dictator. In a voice that only with difficulty he was able to control, he said:

“Do I hear aright? Is it possible that a young Englishman—apparently sane, can stand in my presence, openly defy me, and threaten to face alone, to vanquish alone, the mighty powers of Latinia—the new, the resuscitated Latinia?”

“Your Excellency heard exactly what I said,” replied Hugh calmly. “Your Excellency has probably been informed of the efficacy of the instrument. Also you so far forget what is due to a guest, that you have thought fit to threaten and intimidate me. I do not threaten either you or your state. I merely say this. I have seen the instrument in operation, seen it twice. It is silent, deadly, irresistible and leaves no trace. Do you suppose for a moment that Lord Halmene would not instantly revenge any outrage you may commit on me?” Scarcely could Hugh believe his eyes, but the fact was there—he was winning. Fear, unmistakable, almost craven fear, had passed across the Dictator’s face as Hugh spoke of this efficient power of silent

revenge. He said nothing for a moment, then he spoke.

"I am impervious to threats, and under heaven I think myself beyond assassination. I am persuaded that until my mission is complete my life is sacred. I do not propose to punish you for your great temerity, you probably sin in ignorance. You will communicate immediately with Lord Halmene, and arrange for the formula to be sent by code, together with an experimental set which he will immediately dispatch by air. You will not be permitted to leave until that has all been accomplished. You will hand over your code-book to Count Radicati, in whose keeping I commit you. You will not be sent to prison—yet. You will be well looked after. You will have no cause for complaint on that score. This is my decision. The audience is over."

"One moment, Your Excellency——" Hugh started.

"The audience is over," repeated Radicati, but the Dictator interrupted him.

"What now?" he asked.

"I think it right to say that I will in no circumstances hand my code-book over, and that I shall look upon any attempt to get it as a personal outrage."

"Then you can communicate as best you can without it." The Dictator spoke sharply, and as he spoke, he waved his hand imperiously. The interview was over, and silently Hugh followed the Count through the corridors to the waiting motor-car, and together they drove back to the Palazzo Radicati. Hugh was escorted back to his own suite immediately.

"I regret to have to inform you, my friend, that it is my bounden duty to mount guards in the corridor and courtyard, under the windows," said the Count.

"I also regret the necessity, but I quite understand," Hugh replied.

"Will you be pleased to write a cable for me to dispatch?" the Count asked.

"Certainly—at once," rather grimly replied Hugh, and as he handed the forms, he wrote:

"**HALMENE**, Halmene Towers, Hampshire, England.

"I am detained here failing production instrument and formula. Ordered to demand same from you in quickest time. Since could not freely use code have dispensed with it.

"**VALENTROYD.**"

"There you are—that will answer, I think," he said, handing the sheets to the Count. The latter looked at it, shook his head doubtfully, and replied:

"It seems to me terribly indiscreet, why not use the code? No one will see it but myself, and possibly His Excellency if he wishes?"

"No," replied Hugh decidedly. "You either take that as I have written it or nothing." The old Count again shook his head, but he left the room, and Hugh was left alone to think over the new developments. So at last he was a prisoner. A very comfortably accommodated prisoner it was true, but a prisoner all the same. The aged Chamberlain visited him once or twice, to ask if he had all that he required, begging him to ring for anything that he wished. His lunch was served, and very soon afterwards, his acquaintance, Major Coderna appeared.

"Good-day, Signor Valentroyd," he greeted Hugh. "Would you like a run out in the car or would you like to play billiards?"

"Ha, ha!" Hugh laughed. "So you are appointed

to entertain the prisoner?" But Coderna looked pained.

"No, no," he said. "Don't say it." And Hugh knew that this silent, clean-looking soldier-man, who wore the ribbon of the White Eagle, Military Division, which was only awarded for conspicuous valour in the field, was one to be trusted, and a man who did not like his present job.

"I wouldn't mind a breath of air," Hugh replied, and soon he was sitting beside the Major in a high horse-powered car, speeding along the fine military road to the north. Far over the great plain they rode, and the beautiful air, clean and fresh from the faraway Apennines, was a tonic to Hugh after his unpleasant experiences of the morning. They arrived back before dinner, and Hugh was visited by the Count, who had evidently been waiting for him. He had a cable in his hand.

"This is the reply to your cable," he said a little nervously. Hugh took it, and read:

"HUGH VALENTROYD, ESQUIRE, guest of Count Radicati, Palazzo Radicati, Tiberia, Latinia.

"I am dumbfounded that the Dago has dared to take the insolent and unprecedented step. Tell him I shall give him the demonstration he so earnestly asks for at noon to-morrow. If small demonstration to-morrow is not sufficient, I inform him I have a more ambitious scheme for the day following. But inform him through Radicati. Don't lower your dignity to treat further with the Dago. Are you decently treated? They'll bid you good-bye as Pharaoh did the Israelites by this time to-morrow. Sylvia Peyton all right.

"YOUR PRESIDENT."

"I have told His Excellency," began Count Radicati, "that the word 'Dago' is a code word."

"Exactly," replied Hugh, who felt much better after receiving the vigorous message of the President. "Tell him it's a code word standing for 'Dictator of Latinia.'"

"Speak not so foolishly, my young friend," the old Count raised his arm in protest. "It is an unwise thing to anger the powerful."

"That is precisely what I would like you to tell the Dictator," said Hugh.

"Let us not discuss the matter further, we must await the demonstration to-morrow. I am glad that is to be done. I suppose it will be one experimental set, do you think so?" Hugh was astonished. He read an entirely different significance into the President's cable. Unless he was greatly mistaken the demonstration of the morrow would be of a sinister nature, not a tame compliance with an order that the President deemed insolent.

"I suppose that one experimental set will be sufficient for the purpose that is in the Viscount Halmene's mind," Hugh said diplomatically.

"Please cable him that you are being well treated," pleaded the old man. "I dislike this position, my friend."

Hugh agreed, then the Count said: "Now, you will dine with us to-night, as if nothing had happened, won't you?"

"I most emphatically and decidedly will not," Hugh replied spiritedly. "You put me up here, treat me well, then make a prisoner of me and expect me to treat the matter as if nothing had happened—my dear Count, you are experienced enough to know that you can't treat decent Englishmen like that."

The old politician shook his head dismally, and Hugh

could not help but feel a little sorry for him. He had to obey his master; but on the other hand, the old man was deeply cunning and entirely at one with his chief in all the various transactions the latter entered.

"Very well," said the Count. "I am sorry. I shall arrange for your dinner to be served here," and he left the room. Hugh dined alone, and after reading for some time, retired to bed, where, after thinking over the events of the day, and wondering what was to happen to-morrow to make the Latinian Dictator cast him out "as Pharaoh did the Israelites," his thoughts turned to little Sylvia Peyton, also in a prison, he reflected, a much more grim affair than this. Hugh felt pleased that there was that bond between them. Moreover, they both relied on the President to get them out, and as he dropped off to sleep, he was satisfied that Lord Hal-mene would not fail them.

The next morning Hugh rose and breakfasted, and remained in his rooms all the morning—no one coming near him. He looked out of the windows in the courtyard frequently, but saw nothing, until nearly midday when an aeroplane, flying low, attracted his attention. It circled round and round, then appeared to come very close to the ground, then it rose into the air, and finally made off rapidly towards the north, rising higher and higher as it went. Ten minutes later old Radicati entered his room, wide-eyed and startled.

"Oh, my friend," he cried. "Come to see His Excellency again at once. Come now! Immediately. A most evil thing has happened. A terrible calamity. Come! Come!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A SPECIAL MEETING

“WHAT has happened?” asked Hugh, not altogether surprised that some serious action on the part of the President had been taken.

“Oh! Come, signore, come!” frantically insisted the Count, nor would he say more until they were both in the car that was waiting, and once again on the road to the Dictator’s Palace. Then he turned to Hugh, and said:

“His Excellency has a favourite horse on which he takes his exercises every morning. Twenty minutes ago that horse died. No one can tell how, but an aeroplane, which was flying low, suddenly swooped down until it was quite near the paddock in which the horse was, and the horse died instantly. It kicked once or twice—that was all.”

The Count paused, wiped his brow, and continued:

“Of course, His Excellency knows what happened. I know what happened, and so do you. This is the demonstration of the Viscount Halmene. I would he had chosen any other subject, for His Excellency is beside himself.”

Hugh could well imagine the rage of the Dictator, but he was not without hope that this demonstration of power might have a salutary effect. He replied:

“Assuming that there is anything more than coincidence in the incident, you will agree that His Excel-

lency had ample warning? He knew the potency of the invention, and yet he chose to offer a serious affront to me, who represent Lord Halmene."

The Count looked nervously at him as he said:

"Signor Valentroyd, do you think there is any fear that Lord Halmene may go any further in his protest?"

Hugh smiled slightly as he rejoined:

"I really don't know what he may do. I think it will be advisable for me to communicate with him as freely and as soon as possible."

"Yes, yes," agreed the Count, leaning forward and exhorting the driver to hurry. Quickly the car sped on its way, and once more Hugh found himself at the Dictator's residence. Without stopping to speak further, the Count hurried to the Dictator's ante-room, and Hugh was scarcely seated there before he was back from the inner room.

"Come, Signor Valentroyd," he said, holding the door open, and Hugh stepped forward into the Dictator's room. The great man was striding up and down, but, as Hugh entered, he paused in his walk.

"So," he said, his angry face turned on Hugh, "you have a pretty sense of humour, you and your friend Lord Halmene."

"I am informed, Your Excellency, by Count Radiati, that you have had the misfortune to lose your favourite horse. Permit me to say I am sorry. I am fond of horses and can sympathise with you in your loss. It is, I hope, unnecessary for me to say that I am not in any sense responsible," Hugh replied with quiet dignity.

"Then perhaps you can explain this. This was dropped enclosed in a weighted package and addressed

to me." The Dictator handed Hugh a sheet of paper. On it was written:

"I do not permit enemies to take liberties with my friends. At twelve to-morrow expect a more important demonstration; in the meantime, you have had one lesson.—Halmene."

"What do you say to that?" roared the Dictator.

"Surely there is nothing to say," responded Hugh, and handed back the paper.

"Nothing to say?" almost screamed the other. "Nothing to say when my favourite horse lies dead to satisfy the diabolical sense of humour of your wretched Lord Halmene?"

"Your Excellency made your choice yesterday. I reminded you that it was obvious that some reprisal would be certain to be taken if you so far forgot yourself as to treat a privileged envoy as you have done me. It remains for Your Excellency to decide whether you want more of these demonstrations or not. I am not in the confidence of Lord Halmene in this matter, but I should judge that the next incident will be of more serious importance than a horse," Hugh said coldly.

"Are you threatening me?" asked the Dictator.

"No, certainly not," replied Hugh, "but you are imprisoning me and alienating Lord Halmene. Again you have your choice."

"Have the goodness to wait in the next room a few minutes while I consult with Radicati," said the Dictator, and Hugh withdrew. After waiting a few minutes, he was recalled.

"I have decided to trust your sense of honour, and to offer you a reward," said the Dictator, and the snarling countenance was transformed. He positively smiled on Hugh, who merely bowed politely, saying nothing.

"You will leave immediately for London, but before doing so, you had better send a telegram—in your own code, of course, letting Lord Halmene know that all has been satisfactorily arranged between us. Now, you asked for a further hundred thousand pounds. That is a large sum, but this is a large matter. The draft is here, payable on sight at the Bank of Latinia in London. You will not be in a position to deliver for a week, you say. That is regrettable, but as your English proverb has it 'We must make a virtue of necessity.' Now go—go speedily, Signor Valentroyd, and as you go, think of any method of speeding up the process of delivery. On the day that delivery is effected, I shall present you with a Marquisate of the Latinian Kingdom and the Order of the White Eagle of the First Class. Will this compensate you for the inconvenience you have experienced?"

As he gazed into the beaming face of the Dictator, it was difficult for Hugh to believe that this was the same man who, only a few minutes previously, had been snarling and threatening, his face black with rage, and his eyes, now beaming forth good humour, sparkling with fury. Of a truth, the Dictator never did things by halves. Perhaps the latter read something of what was passing in Hugh's mind, for he added:

"I can be a good friend, Signor Valentroyd, as well as a bitter enemy." Hugh thanked him and expressed his approval, took the proffered draft, and wrote a cable to the President, briefly stating that all was now satisfactorily arranged; then taking his leave of the Dictator, who was now affability itself, he was escorted by Count Radicati to the motor car and driven back to the Palazzo. There a meal was served immediately. Hugh hurried, for he could see that his host was im-

patient, and, after the meal was over, the Count drove him to the aerodrome where a 'plane was waiting to take him to London. Very cordial was the old Count as he bid him good-bye.

"And, Signor Valentroyd, you will see to the delivery of the instrument speedily, will you not?" he asked almost pathetically. Hugh assured him that he would, and after bidding the Count farewell, entered the aeroplane and departed for London. Late in the evening the long journey was ended, and Hugh arrived at Croydon to find the President's car awaiting him, and a message for him to drive immediately to the club. Upon arriving there, he found Lord Halmene, urbane as ever, and for the next hour Hugh was engaged in telling him of his adventures. When he produced the draft for the one-hundred thousand pounds, even the President opened his eyes in wonder.

"What a pity that you are such a rich man, Valentroyd," he said, "for you're a born money-getter. By the Lord Harry, I'd like to have seen the Dago when the Hawk put an end to his favourite mount. Do you know the photograph of that unfortunate animal has appeared in every illustrated magazine in Europe? Bless your life, yes. 'The Dictator riding,' 'The Dictator giving his favourite charger a bit of sugar,' 'The Dictator patting his noble steed,' and all the rest of it."

"Did the Hawk do it?" Hugh asked.

"Of course he did," the President replied. "Now that brings me to the next item. You must under no circumstances go to your house at present. There's been another burglary there. It's the same thing—the Secret Service gang of some country or other, and to be perfectly frank with you, your life's not safe at present. Rackstraw, the pilot, tells me that a 'plane

followed you to the South of France when you set out last time to Tiberia, and I've had inquiries made, and I find that the 'plane was booked from Croydon, by an agent of Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos. What the dickens that means I don't quite know. I'll find out, however. It may be that he has traced you or the 'plane as taking part in the Oil Well Push. In any event, until we see exactly what we have to face there, you had better keep out of the way. You can either stay here or down at Halmene Towers. You will find an old friend down there, by the way. The Sheik Ibn-el-Said has arrived for his share of the insurance money. I have just got that settled and will pay him out to-night. To-morrow night is a general meeting of the Club Council at Halmene Towers, and you must be there in any case, an important meeting."

"What is the news of Sylvia Peyton?" Hugh asked.

"Well she makes another appearance to-morrow before the magistrate," the President said, "and Sir Joseph Symes is going to try to secure either a dismissal or a committal. He assures me that on the strength of the alibi we can provide, he is perfectly happy about the result. Now I had a chat with Sylvia the other day, and I, with you, was equally shocked at the silly tale she told about your love for Eunice de Laine, and your marriage to her. Of course I told her that it was all nonsense and insisted upon her telling me where she got her silly tale. She says she got it from Eunice's maid. Eunice lent her her maid, you know, to take her some things daily to the prison when she came over here. I am convinced that Eunice knows nothing about it, and I can't get hold of the maid because she has accompanied her mistress to New York. I expect them back in a few days."

"Then does Sylvia clearly understand the truth now?" Hugh asked.

"Oh, I think so," replied the President, "but you mustn't attempt to see her just now, my boy. I want you to keep out of the way. Don't let us have any chance of complications until I get an opportunity to settle everything." Hugh agreed, though he was disturbed at the intimation of the President that he was now the centre of interest of the various Secret Service people. He felt, however, that his chief was strong enough to see him safely through, and after further conversation over dinner, for they dined together at the club, he agreed to accompany the President down to the latter's Hampshire residence to stay for the next few days.

When he got to Halmene Towers, Hugh was cordially greeted by the old Sheik, who was still jubilant about the recent victory over the Greek, and still more jubilant when he received his share of the President's insurance operations connected with that epic incident.

The next day Hugh spent with the old Sheik, wandering about the grounds and the fine park, and listening to the tales his old friend had to tell of the great days that were gone.

In the evening dinner was served at seven o'clock, and was strictly a family affair. Only Hugh, the Sheik and the President being present, for the Council of the Brick-Bat Club was to meet at eight o'clock, and arrangements had been made to give a supper to the members in the main dining-room at eleven.

At a quarter to eight the President rose, excused himself, and left his two friends, and punctually at eight they were conducted by a footman to the huge

room on the first-floor that served as the council-chamber of the club.

There, round the table, were the same figures that Hugh had seen on his first memorable visit. There were, indeed, more on this occasion, but to Hugh there were two notable absentees. Sylvia Peyton was still in Holloway Gaol, and Eunice de Laine was in New York. Hugh and the Sheik were escorted to their places. Hugh found himself at the extreme head of the table next to the raised bench on which he had first seen the President sitting. On his immediate right was the Hawk. The Sheik Ibn-el-Said was seated on the other side of the table about half-way down. The bench at the end was empty. Desultory conversation was proceeding between various members, and the Hawk and Hugh exchanged a few sentences.

"Glad to see you back," said the Hawk. "Nasty lot those Latinians."

"Yes," replied Hugh, "I am glad to get back, I assure you. I believe I owe a good deal to you for that."

"Huh! that's all right," said the Hawk. "I fixed his horse, didn't I? Like to fix *him*."

Just then a door at the end opened, and everybody stood up. Through the door came a purple-robed figure—the American whom Hugh had seen on the first occasion he had been present. After him appeared the Indian, and, last of all, wearing his heavy chain and a mask, the President. His two colleagues stood respectfully until the chief was seated, then they also took their seats, and the members round the table followed suit.

"Are there any strangers here?" the American asked.

"All present are members," replied the Hawk who

stood to speak, then sat down again. Upon this the President removed his mask.

"I present the following report of the proceedings of the club since our last meeting," said the American, and then he proceeded to read a long account of the various transactions of the club during the time between the last meeting and now. In the account Hugh figured prominently, and appreciative eyes were turned on him from all over the room. Very lightly was the Regent Street affair touched upon, but it was mentioned. One of the members had bungled. His instructions had been issued by the Hawk, and were meant to silence the jeweller. The man who carried out the operation had evidently struck too hard in panic, but it was impossible to present the club with a detailed account, as the man was either in Mexico or on his way there, and no details were yet available. The regrettable incident of the arrest of Sylvia Peyton, who was not in any way concerned, would be put right by the establishment of a perfect alibi. And so the account went on. A large balance was available for distribution, and the end of the American's speech was enthusiastically cheered. The Indian briefly seconded, and amidst a general showing of hands, the report was declared carried unanimously.

When this had been disposed of, the President arose, and his rising was the signal for great cheering.

"Members of the Brick-Bat Club," he commenced, "I have called a special meeting of the Club Council to-night in order to make several important announcements. Let me say at once that financially the club is very strong. You have, at my suggestion, in the years gone by entrusted me with the control of a special fund against eventualities. A fund entirely under my

own control, unaudited, the amount of which is not known to a living soul, except me. I am happy to tell you that that fund, to which I also have contributed, is larger than any of you imagine, and has never once been called upon." Here loud cheers interrupted the speaker. "I have gathered this club gradually together, formed it around myself, and perhaps it would be right to say that the personal element in it is predominant. I have looked upon it as my club. The loyalty of members I have regarded as loyalty to me personally." Again they cheered him, and the President at some length reviewed the history of the club, then touched upon the enormous value of the secret invention in respect of which he had already negotiated with two Governments. He said, which was news to Hugh, that already a substantial deposit had been received from the American Government through the agency of Mr. Alfred K. Stokes, and that a further amount was expected, following certain prescribed tests which, the President assured them, were easy to accomplish.

"Now," Lord Halmene continued, "in funds for distribution now, and in reserve, there is enough, and to spare, to make every member of the club comfortable—even affluent. It must not be forgotten that when I collect the ultimate amounts of money for the secret invention, and eventually sell it, it ceases to be any longer an exclusive asset for the furtherance of the designs of this association. Indeed, if it were used at all, it would almost certainly attract suspicion, and almost certainly end in the disbandment of the club under duress, with certain prosecutions and all sorts of consequent difficulties.

"Be very clear about that. While the invention re-

mained exclusive to us, we could wield power, have wielded power, to an almost unlimited extent. We could protect ourselves from treachery within, and defy all comers. That enviable position is now ended. It ends the moment I complete the actual sale to the Government I have chosen to sell to.

"The conclusion to be drawn from all this, the obvious conclusion, my friends, is that the Brick-Bat Club must cease to exist." A startled look crossed many faces, and bewildered eyes were fastened on the President, as he continued: "I know that my decision cannot in the nature of things be a popular one. We have long been associated together, most of us, and our association has been a happy and a profitable one.

"We cannot, however, escape the facts of the figures. We are rich, and we have a chance to get out without trouble. Suppose for a moment we were to take the alternative. Who is there among you so blind as to imagine that we could carry on indefinitely, without the all-important secret instrument?

"It is only fair to tell you that at the moment we are the subject, as a club, of the suspicion of every police force in Europe. I can guarantee clearing that lot when I sell the instrument, but I couldn't guarantee, wouldn't even dream of attempting to guarantee, our continued immunity.

"With reluctance, therefore, but convinced of the necessity, I hereby proclaim that this club do dissolve from actual operation now; that it now participates in the dividend to be distributed according to the reports tabled and read to-night and declared passed, and that in six months from this date the club meet once more, here, to share the reserve fund and such assets as we realise. On that date I will make a more personal ad-

dress. The members will excuse me from adding more now."

The President sat down, and for a moment dead silence reigned. It was broken by the Hawk. He cast a nervous look around, as if seeking some sign of support, then turning to the bench, he addressed the President.

"For the first time in our connection, Mr. President, I beg to disagree with you. I do not propose to make a long speech, but I want to say that I strongly object to the club closing down. I believe that most of us feel as I do. I have agreed to your being the 'one and only,' during the running of this club, and you've always been right. I'll admit that, but I think before you talk of closing the club you should take a vote."

Uncomfortably looking around, the Hawk sat down; he had looked away from the President during the latter part of his remarks, unable to face the blazing eyes turned on him. Murmurs could be heard about the table. What they portended, Hugh could not tell. The President, eyes flashing, face scarlet, holding the edge of his robe in one hand and with the other striking the desk before him, roared:

"I did not invite suggestions. My word is absolute here. One member has thought fit to mutiny. There is one punishment for mutiny—and the punishment is equal, from the highest to the lowest. Does any other member feel like joining the Hawk. Come on, any member? Speak up!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE HAWK TAKES WING

THE President's challenge was followed by dead silence. After a pause, he continued:

"So nobody wishes to join the Hawk?" But this time the Hawk stood again. Turning to the President, he said:

"I was shocked at the idea of closing the club. I beg pardon." Grimly the President looked down on him.

"No one knows better than the Hawk that it is impossible for me to grant pardon for mutiny," he said.

Breathlessly all present looked at the two actors in the unprecedented scene. Hugh was certainly not prepared for the next startling development, for the Hawk suddenly pushed back his chair, and in a flash was flying down the room to the door.

"Stop him!" shouted the President, and instantly all present made a dash in the direction of the Hawk, but it was too late. He had passed through the door. With surprising agility the President pushed through the excited throng, reached the door, and bellowed down the corridors:

"Stop that man."

A scene of wild excitement followed. No one had seen the Hawk leave any door. He had simply disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him up. Every nook and cranny of the house was searched. Then frantic messages were sent to the club and to every

known resort of its members. The hunt for the Hawk had begun.

Very grave was the face of the President, as he again met the Club Council in the large council room, when all the excitement had died down and members had been re-summoned to the chamber.

"Before I was interrupted," he said, "I had announced as our programme that we suspend activity, following the distribution of funds to-night, and that we meet again in six months' time to receive the final share-out, which will include the purchase money of the secret death invention.

"That programme still stands. Indeed, what was before advisable, has now become imperative, by the treachery of the Hawk. On that point I don't want any member to feel unduly worried. The resources of the club are greater than any of you know, and we shall get the Hawk, without doubt, before many hours are over. It, nevertheless, behooves every member to leave no stone unturned to trace him.

"Were he to attempt to betray us he knows that an orgy of death, on a scale unprecedented, would follow, and include himself. Personally, after making certain arrangements, I shall go on as if nothing had happened. I suggest that every member follow my example. I bid you good fortune and good-night."

Again the President rose; this time with that unruffled dignity that was usual to him. The members around the table also rose. Then, accompanied by the robed figures who sat on his right and left, the President withdrew through the door behind him.

The next morning Hugh came down to breakfast and found the President, smiling and urbane as ever, eating a hearty meal of chops and kidneys. By his manner

there was certainly nothing to indicate that a really serious thing had occurred on the previous night. Yet Hugh felt that, until the Hawk was captured, the position was infinitely more dangerous than it had ever been before. For the first time in the history of the Brick-Bat Club, a holder of dread secrets was at large, alienated from the association, and in terror of his own life. The position was full of danger. What line might not the Hawk take in his despair? With the President he knew that there was neither forgiveness nor compromise; the Hawk *must* do something drastic, and that soon, Hugh felt.

"Well, young fellow," began the President, "and how are you this morning." Indicating a place, he added: "Come along, pull your chair up."

"Is our friend, the Sheik Ibn-el-Said, not yet astir?" asked Hugh, after returning the President's greetings.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the President. "Like the Hawk, he's on the wing. The old chap's got a nose like a bloodhound for treachery. After that scene last night, he would not go to bed, but collected his money, arranged for the 'plane to take him at once to his lair in the East; he's on his way to Alexandria now."

Glancing round to see that no servant overheard, Hugh said:

"But the position is rendered a little awkward, isn't it, by the defection of the Hawk?"

"More than a little awkward," replied the President. "In fact, it's infernally unpleasant. You see, the Hawk was greatly in my confidence in one branch of the work of the club. Moreover, he was one of the three living persons who knows how the secret invention was used. He does not know its principles, fortunately, nor does he know where it is manufactured. I think it extremely

likely that he will try to discover that, so we must be very careful; that is, of course, if we don't lay him by the heels in the next few hours.

"By the way, just in case of accidents, I'm going to show you where the invention is made, and I may tell you that in connection with it, I'm going up to town this morning to see my friend General Carpenly at the War Office. You'd better come with me."

Hugh agreed, and within an hour was sitting beside the President, racing along the country roads in the latter's swift car, bound for London.

* * * * *

Meanwhile a curious scene was being enacted outside the precincts of the Brick-Bat Club.

Two men in plain-clothes, apparently taking no notice of anything in particular, strolled past the doors of the building, and when one was not near enough to see everyone that passed in or out, the other one was.

These were detectives, and it was no secret to the man at the door that they were there. He amused himself by watching them meet occasionally some little way off and pass a word. The doorkeeper was quite used to "Yard-men." Some distance off, apparently engrossed in the window of an antique shop, was a little, dark, foreign-looking man. He also knew of the presence of the detectives, but they did not know of him. He looked long into the window, until an old gentleman came, with white whiskers, who also stopped to look in the window. The little man kept looking as he muttered, apparently to the window:

"Not yet."

The little man then moved off and the old man remained. Presently the latter was relieved by a girl, and she in turn by the little man again, and so it went on.

There was always someone looking into the windows of the antique shop, from which position a good view of the Brick-Bat Club could be obtained.

After some time another figure appeared on the scene. This man came furtively along and watched carefully from the doorway of a tobacconist's shop. Then he moved a little nearer the club, stopped, turned on his heel and walked swiftly away. He had seen one of the plain-clothes men. He disappeared for a time and, when he appeared again, it was on the other side of the club, nearly opposite the antique shop. In the distance he made out the other plain-clothes man, but it was the window of the antique shop that rivetted his attention. He watched the changes take place, saw the girl, the old man, and, last of all, after waiting for over half-an-hour, he saw the little foreign-looking man. The watcher waited for some ten minutes longer, then approached the foreigner.

"Look here," he said. "I can tell your boss more in five minutes than you and the old man and the girl will find out in five years."

The little man started as if he had been shot; for a moment it looked as if he were about to take to his heels. Then, changing his mind, he said:

"Who are you, and what do you speak of?"

"Oh, drop the nonsense," said the newcomer. "Look here, if your boss knew that you had a chance to talk to me, he'd fire you straight off for not taking it. But it doesn't matter, there's a good many want to know what I've got to tell them," and he made as if to move off.

"Wait, wait," said the little foreigner. "How do I know who you are? How do you know who I am?"

"Well, I do anyway," said the stranger. "You are

employed to watch that place over there by a Greek Dago called Pampadoulos, and you are watching for some people who came over some oil wells in an aeroplane, when some heavy stuff was going on at the works, and the money was pinched at the same time."

The little man's eyes opened wider and wider.

"You shall come with me at once, my friend," he said. "Taxi! Taxi!" He hailed a passing cab and directed the driver to proceed to Park Street. Arriving there, he dismissed the cab, rang a doorbell, and was admitted to a large and elaborately-furnished flat.

The stranger was taken into a drawing-room, furnished in Louis Quatorze style, and his companion disappeared. The door was opened after a space of three or four minutes, and the large, greasy-looking figure of Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos, clad in black morning-coat and vest and striped trousers, came into the room.

"Ah! my friend," he began, in his oily, patronising tones. "I am glad to see you. It is, I am told, that you can give me the help in proving the villainy of a scoundrel, and earning for him the punishment he deserves. I will give you my word of honour, as a gentleman, that I will save you from troubles, and I will give you the large reward. Now tell me everything."

"For heaven's sake stop that," the stranger returned. "Who do you think I am?" His eyes blazed with rage as he continued. "I know everything there is to know about you since you robbed the old woman where you used to work in the vineyard in Greece, when you were twelve, right down to the time you fixed things for the old white-whiskered nigger to get his oil wells. I know about your 'two-stretch' in Germany, and I know about another 'two-stretch' or more that's waiting for you in

London, if the Public Prosecutor gets to know you're about again."

"Hush, hush! Oh! hush! What is this? Blackmail? I have no money." The greasy countenance of Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos had undergone a great change. The oiliness that had smoothed his tones was absent. There was a yellow-greyness about his flabby cheeks, and his voice shook. Indeed, at times, in his panic, as he raised his voice, he squeaked.

"No, it isn't blackmail!" retorted the other. "Now you listen to me, and I'll show you how to make a bit of money. I've got to work in this thing with someone who knows the ropes. I've been working up to now with an enemy of yours. Now he's an enemy of mine, too. I'd be quite content to let bygones be bygones; but he won't. No, if I'm caught—I'm done for, and that's the truth.

"Now my name is The Hawk, and I've been in charge of some funny businesses that doesn't need talking about now or any other time. But my boss, Lord Hal-mene, whom we call the President"—the eyes of Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos opened wide with excitement as the Hawk continued—"he's got a thing that is worth all the money you ever heard of. Now you've been following a young chap to Latinia, haven't you?"

The Greek nodded.

"Well, it's to sell that thing to the Latinian Government that he went, and already they've parted with two hundred thousand pounds." Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos gasped.

"My heavens," he stammered. "I represent the Secret Service of—I mean I'm in touch—— Never mind that now. Go—go on. Have a drink, my friend. Have a cigar. Wait, I'll get you a good one."

Eunice de Laine was having a busy morning. She had just returned to town, and had driven immediately after breakfast to see Sylvia in Holloway Prison. She had found her very cool at first, but Eunice had insisted on her telling what was the matter.

After much pressure, Sylvia admitted that Judith, Eunice's maid, had told her that during the voyage in the Mediterranean, Hugh Valentroyd and Eunice had been alone together on the yacht, developed an intimate friendship, and finally married at Malta. She had seen them, she had said, come out of a church together.

Eunice told the distracted girl that they had visited many churches in Malta, what time the ship coaled, and that it was by accident that they were thrown together on the yacht alone. The obedience they both owed to the President made protest about trivial matters of convention absurd. At last Eunice seemed to convince Sylvia, and she left her in happier vein.

As she drove back to her dainty flat, Eunice communed lengthily with herself.

"What a quixotic fool you are. This is the one man that really mattered, and you throw him to that little weeping chit, who has some dark secret in her life that accounts for these continual disappearances. Of course I must deal drastically with poor Judith, though she sinned out of loyalty to me. Now how on earth did that girl guess my secret? I never discuss things with her or any other servant. I don't talk in my sleep, surely, do I?"

There was just a suspicion of a tear in each of the fine eyes, as she glanced at herself in the tiny mirror of her bag. Quickly she wiped her eyes, powdered her

face, and, by the time her cab stopped in Half-Moon Street, she was her old merry self again. Dismissing the cab, she entered her flat.

Then, for the third time since her return, she rang up Hugh, but could not get through to him. Old James said he did not know where he was, had no address to forward letters to—nothing.

Going to a cupboard, she took down an album, containing sketches, some in crayon, some in water-colour, which she had made at various times, for she was no mean artist. Presently she turned up the picture of a white marble villa on the shores of Lake Maggiore. When in her rare sentimental moods Eunice always took out this picture. She had painted it years ago when staying at Isolabella. It had struck her as the most beautiful villa she had ever seen, and at the time she had thought that if ever she married a man she loved—and she would never marry any other—she would come to live with him in this villa by the blue waters of the beautiful Maggiore.

Since meeting Hugh, she knew that he was the only man who would walk the beautiful grounds of that villa with her. He, or none. Had she now to give up all hope? Was the villa to be always only a dream residence?

Her reverie was disturbed by the entry of her housemaid.

“Mr. Hugh Valentroyd to see you, madam.”

With a start, Eunice turned, coloured slightly, closed the book and replaced it. Then, completely in control of herself again, she said:

“Show Mr. Valentroyd in.”

Hugh entered, and she turned to greet him.

“My dear Eunice,” he began. “I wondered when I

was to see you again. I missed you before I went East. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm splendid, thanks," she replied, smiling, "and so glad to see you again. You look well. Oh, I must tell you at once—I've seen Sylvia this morning and you can't imagine how horrified I was at the silly tales she'd got hold of. I'm very, very sorry, Hugh, but I've found out that my maid Judith was responsible for them. I know it isn't necessary to tell you that I——"

"Of course not, Eunice, I know that. Don't hurt me by saying any more about it. You do look bright and sparkling this morning." As he spoke Hugh took her by the shoulders and, colouring slightly, the girl laughed, as she replied:

"Do you think so, Hugh?"

"I do," and he made a slight movement. Eunice felt her heart beat more quickly. Was the impossible to happen after all? But Hugh had moved slightly aside as the door opened and the housemaid announced:

"Chief Inspector Overtley to see you at once, madam. He insists on seeing you at once." And Hugh thought the last words were added rather maliciously.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE HAWK'S TALONS

INSPECTOR OVERTLEY entered the room, gave a quick look of surprise in Hugh's direction, then turning to Eunice, said:

"Miss Eunice de Laine, I hold a warrant for your arrest, under the Official Secrets Act, and I warn you that anything you may now say may be used in evidence against you later."

Having delivered his bomb-shell, the inspector looked from one to the other, to watch the signs of discomfiture manifest themselves on the faces of the vanquished, and so far as Hugh was concerned, Overtley was not disappointed, for Hugh was shocked—and showed it.

Eunice bit her lip with annoyance, and said:

"I often wonder how you have reached the eminence you have in the Police Force, Inspector Overtley, for you invariably 'butt in' at the wrong time, and your 'butting in' is invariably wrong. I shall go with you, of course—for probably two hours I shall stay with you. That will depend entirely on the ability of Mr. Valentroyd here to move quickly. Hugh, never mind standing there looking as if you had just got six sets of Income Tax papers. Go straight to the President. Go quickly and tell him what has happened."

"One moment," put in the inspector. "I want particularly to see Mr. Valentroyd. I have called fre-

quently to see you, sir, but your butler has always informed me——”

“Oh! some other time—some other time,” interfered Eunice, with a little irate stamp of her foot. “One arrest at once, inspector—don’t be greedy. Hugh! Rush!” Needing no further admonition, Hugh left the room, passed the housemaid who had been listening carefully at the keyhole, and drove straight to the club.

There he found the President, and told him exactly what had happened.

“Hum!” murmured the latter. “I’m not altogether surprised at that, but it’s a pity—a great pity. It means we shall have to take the last steps now instead of a week hence, then losing the prospect of a further Latinian payment, and a ‘Red’ payment for the Secret Death. However, it can’t be helped. Come along.”

They entered the waiting car and, on a whispered word from the President, were driven off rapidly to Whitehall, stopping at the door of the War Office.

Leaving Hugh in the car, the President entered, and then remained for an hour. When he finally reappeared he was not alone, but was accompanied by a tall, military-looking man in mufti, who entered the car with him, and was introduced to Hugh as General Lord Waugh. In silence the two sat while the car traversed the short distance to the Home Office. Here again Hugh was left outside, and the General and the President entered.

Half-an-hour passed, and then they came back talking for two minutes on the pavement. Then they shook hands, and the General, nodding through the car window to Hugh, hurried off. The President then got into the car, which drove rapidly back to the club.

“Now, Valentroyd,” he said. “Things are moving

and no mistake! Let me first of all deal with the matters you know most about. Sylvia Peyton, for instance. I have left all the evidence of the alibi with the Home Secretary, and she will be brought up finally to-day before the magistrate and discharged. The handkerchief was the only serious evidence there was, and one of the assistants remembers that a handkerchief was found some time prior to the murder, and left on Mr. Marnington's desk. This was obviously Sylvia Peyton's, because she made a purchase in the shop as nearly as she can remember a week before the tragedy. He opened his desk on the day of the murder to take out a dual key for the strong-room, and in his excitement, he must have picked the handkerchief up with it. You see, the room he entered was in semi-darkness. The front shop lights were never lit. So that's settled. Eunice de Laine will be free in five minutes. There's nothing in her case at all. She had some documents sent to me by the American Authorities in completion of my arrangements with Stokes. I sent her to America for them. They were all in code, and, thinking he was reaching heights of astuteness before unknown, our old friend Overtley had her state-room turned over carefully and everything photographed. I have explained the thing satisfactorily to Lord Waugh. In fact, Valentroyd, I've told him the truth—told him I've had some money from the Americans—but, by the very nature of the thing, he knows I have not parted with my secret. A demonstration and a cheque on account! That is all."

"There is one thing I would particularly like to ask you," said Hugh, smiling at the President's humour. "I know the alibi for Sylvia is perfectly valid, but it

has always been a matter of intense surprise to me that Sylvia should be in the club at all."

"Ha! Ha!" interrupted the President laughingly. "You mean, in other words, she's too shy and retiring and too apparently weak to make an adventuress? My dear chap, don't always judge a book by its cover—Sometimes the wickedest little brains lurk behind the most demure faces. But don't look so pained, Valentroyd, I'm not going to make any horrible disclosures about Sylvia Peyton. As a matter of fact, I met her in pretty much the same circumstances as you did. She was practically destitute—had no money—no fares—nothing. There was something in the girl's face that appealed to me. I brought her into the club, where, if she has mixed with some doubtful characters, she's been safe—and there you are— Hello, here we are."

The President jumped hurriedly from the car, and ran along the street for a few yards, Hugh following.

"What is it?" asked Hugh.

"Come along—quick!" the President ordered, as he turned and briskly entered the club, making straight for the room known as the Hawk's Nest.

Here he rang a bell, which was promptly answered by the big, good-natured thug, whose acquaintance Hugh had made under such strenuous circumstances.

"Mobilise, every man you can get," ordered the President. "Watch this address in Park Street." He handed a slip of paper to the man. "Wait a minute"—the President had turned to a large album which he took down from a shelf. "Have this copied immediately. It is a photograph of Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos, and every member must have a copy at once. The Hawk was with him outside here a moment ago. They must

both be accounted for within twelve hours. Do you understand?"

The President looked up grimly, and the big man immediately replied:

"Within twelve hours, Mr. President." Then left the room.

"This is a very tricky position, Valentroyd," said the President, turning to Hugh. "I rather expected the Hawk would anonymously communicate with the authorities, but I saw him a moment ago with our old friend Pampadoulos. This is exceedingly awkward. Within twelve hours we are going to meet Lord Waugh again, you and I, and I'm going to turn over to him the invention. Yes—for good and all. To tell you the truth, Valentroyd, I shall, in a sense, be glad to get rid of it. It's a devilish nasty thing to possess a terrible weapon like that, that everybody else wants. It will be safe with our Government. I always intended they should have it eventually—as I told you.

"Now, for the rest of the day don't show your nose outside this club. There's the Latinian gang, the American gang, the 'Red' gang, and Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos in unholy alliance with the Hawk. Anything might happen. I am going to strengthen the defence department here."

Again ringing a bell the President ordered the big man to bring a number of men up from the East End café and have them waiting. Then he opened the safe behind him, and took out a small camera-like instrument.

"This is the thing that does the trick, my boy," he said, tapping it lightly; then he slipped it into his pocket.

"Now, with reasonable luck," said the President,

tapping his pocket, "we shall soon be free from the cares and worries of the club, and be able to settle down quietly, not bothered from henceforth about the costs of the pomps and vanities of this wicked world." The President laid his head back and gave a great sigh.

"Mind you, Valentroyd," he went on, "the club's been a wonderful organisation—wonderful."

"I have often wondered," said Hugh, "why on earth those people that I went to see about Sylvia's alibi were connected with the club. I mean the bishop, the Harley Street doctor and people like that. They surely don't——"

"Don't need to thief?" interrupted the President. "Of course, they don't. I don't mind telling you more than I would tell anyone else, but in their cases I can only indicate the type of reason; I cannot give you the details of any single case.

"The activities of the club have been many-sided. You have seen several—but there have been many more sides than you dream of.

"There has been its philanthropic side. The club has made it possible for the poorest of the poor to get a holiday. It has made it possible for some of the outcasts and the submerged to get the best that medical science can give, and to follow it up by proper convalescence. Oh! and much more than that.

"Well, now, these people—the bishops, the doctors—the society hostesses and the rest, have in their day stood in utter peril. Have experienced some crises in their lives, and their need has filtered through to me. The club has been able to relieve them. Sometimes they have been blackmailed. Sometimes threatened by moneylenders and unscrupulous financiers of the Mogra K.P. type. Whatever their need—the club has helped

them, and in return they have expressed their gratitude to it, when they could, in some service.

"Indeed the needs of some are not yet fully satisfied, but all can be—all will be."

Again Hugh pondered on the complex character of the man opposite to him, who combined the simple-hearted benevolence of a Saint Francis with the ruthlessness of a Monte Cristo.

For the rest of the day they remained at the Brick-Bat; then, after dining there, they set off to Euston Station, where they met Lord Waugh, who was accompanied by two other senior officers, and the whole party entered the North Express.

The compartment they entered was distinctly stuffy. The steam heaters were full on and the windows closed.

"I think we might have a breath of air," observed General Waugh.

"Certainly, my dear chap," said the President, and moved towards the off-side window. One of the officers who accompanied them was there before him, however, and lowered the window. He remained looking out for a second or so, then turned.

"By Jove," he said. "Did you ever see such a whopping big rat as that fellow running about under the other platform there. Look at him."

The others moved to the side and watched an enormous rat, which could be plainly seen by the light of an arc lamp, running about under the opposite platform.

"Gentlemen," said the President. "I'll just give you a little demonstration of my patent rat-killer," and he moved towards the open window, unbuttoned his overcoat, and withdrew from his pocket the small thing which looked like a camera. All watched him closely.

He glanced in the direction of the rat in its sweep. There was no light—no missile—nothing that seemed to come from the instrument, but the rat suddenly jumped convulsively, then lay down. They watched it for a few moments but it never stirred. The President moved another button, and withdrew the instrument, and still holding it in his hand, sat down.

“Marvellous—marvellous,” muttered the General. “I say, Lord Halmene, you are sure—absolutely sure that no duplicate exists—that no formula for the process of manufacture has left you?”

“Absolutely, my dear General,” replied the President. “Only one man besides myself and the actual scientist who made the discovery knows of the existence of the laboratory where the experiments have been carried out and the instrument perfected. Even Valentroyd here, who has been my right-hand, and who undertook the Latinian business for me, is coming with us now for the first time. He has never before seen or heard the professor’s name.”

“What exactly did you sell to the Latinians,” asked General Waugh.

“My dear General—I sold them a pup,” replied the President with a merry twinkle in his eye. “I showed them what we could do—and they poured money out like water to get it. By the way, I shall need some measure of protection from you, so will Valentroyd. We don’t want stilettos sticking into us every time we go out.”

“That will be arranged,” replied the General. “Is that thing dangerous as you have it now?” for the President still toyed with the instrument.

“Not a bit—no more than a pistol with the safety-catch in position and no finger on the trigger. This

wants renewing, too. So small an instrument can only carry a limited amount of 'Meranium' from which the deadly rays emanate. With a machine the size of a handbag you could wipe out an army."

The President put the instrument back into his pocket, and for several seconds all eyes were fixed on that pocket where so sinister a machine lurked.

Then they talked of other things as the train rushed through the night, until at last they descended from it at Stoke, where a motor-car was waiting, which carried them through miles and miles of pottery villages and drab surroundings that the first breaking light of dawn mercifully veiled.

At last they stopped, left the car, and proceeded across an old bridge over a canal and up a steep hillside. Presently they arrived at some buildings, old and dilapidated, standing on a disused clay bank.

"Here we are," said the President. "Hello, there's a light—and unless I mistake somebody talking—go carefully."

In the light of the single electric bulb burning on the bench behind him, his face ghastly, was the old professor. He wore a long night-shirt, and his grey locks straggled down over his temple. He trembled with cold—perhaps fear.

Before him, menacing, stood the Hawk, revolver in hand, and beside the Hawk stood Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos.

"For the last time—give us the formula and prove it by making the test, or I'll scatter your old brains to the rats!" The Hawk took a threatening step forward.

"All right," said the old man. "I suppose I must show you—look here." On the bench at his hand lay

an instrument very like the one the President had in his pocket. His hand nearly covered it. Coloured rays seemed to project from half-a-dozen weird-looking instruments standing on the bench, and on these the eyes of Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos were fixed as he stepped forward.

He would have done better to look at the glint in the old professor's eyes, and to have noted the determination on the tightly shut thin lips.

"Go and watch," ordered the Hawk to Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos. "I'll cover the old man with this revolver in case he starts any nonsense." Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos stood beside the professor, his eyes glued on the litter of laboratory appliances, to discover the great secret, and he was not disappointed, for at the moment he stood level with the old man, the latter pressed a button on the small instrument under his right hand, and with a demoniacal yell Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos staggered backwards and fell.

For a moment the Hawk was too astonished to act, then realised what had happened.

"You old swine," he shrieked, raising his revolver, but he never fired, for just as he was about to do so, he also gave a tortured scream, and with staring eyes, fell to the ground. The professor looked into the depths of gloom beyond the range of his bench light, to see the President framed in the doorway, the little instrument in his hand, and, behind him, Lord Waugh.

* * * * *

Three days had gone by, and, gathered round a hospital bed, were the President, Hugh Valentroyd and Sylvia Peyton. On the bed lay the Hawk, who had recovered consciousness and had expressed a wish to see Sylvia Peyton.

Much had happened in the meantime. The British Government had tested the secret invention, and, after proving its terrific power and terrible accuracy, had paid a large sum of money to the President.

Needless to say, the tragedy on the hill-side was put down to an accident, and Mogra Kadogra Pampadoulos lay for ever in a wind-swept Staffordshire cemetery, nor did any of his kind know the order of his going.

The Government had determined to entrust this terrible weapon to the League of Nations—an earnest of its powers, so that it should lie beyond the reach of ambitious dictators, or revolutionary fanatics, but remain to enforce, in the last resort, the decrees of International Justice and Righteousness. The old professor was going to settle in Geneva.

Eunice de Laine had slipped away—she told Hugh to be good to Sylvia, then, laughing her merry little laugh, that was to cover a heartache for ever, she said:

“I’m not the settling down kind. I think I was born to be a female Ishmael—I’m like Satan in the book of Job. ‘I wander to and fro in the earth, and up and down therein’”—and she was gone.

The President, Hugh and Sylvia waited round the Hawk’s death-bed. He spoke at last. Looking at Sylvia, he said:

“You think nobody knows what you used to clear out for—and meet a man, don’t you?”

Sylvia began to tremble. Both the President and Hugh looked at her.

“Well, you went to meet your father,” went on the Hawk, fixing her with his little bright eyes. “Your old man, who was supposed to murder his eldest brother and has been ‘on the run’ ever since.

“Well he didn’t, because I did. I stood behind the

curtain. I heard them quarrel, I saw your father leave. Then when all was quiet, I came out and started working on your uncle's safe. I had got it out from the wall—I intended taking the back off it, when your uncle came into the room. He let out a yell, and I swiped him one—put him right out, I did. Your old man was suspected—he flew. I saw you meet him—in Paddington, in Chapel Street. You met him in 'Frisco as well, a year or so ago.

"Well, I made the same confession this morning and the police are waiting to pinch me—but it's my bones they'll pinch, not me. I'm through."

The Hawk was breathing heavily now. He looked up at the President.

"I-nearly-did-it-on-you-Mr.-President," he laboriously uttered—"I played dirty."

"That's all right—forget it, old man," said the President, bending forward—but the Hawk had taken wings for his last flight.

* * * * *

The marriage of Hugh and Sylvia came to pass in due time. It would be an unforgivable omission were one not to mention two visitors who called upon Hugh on the morning of his wedding. The announcement of their presence was made by James:

"Two gentlemen—foreigners—beginning again, if I may say so, sir," he said, and Hugh went into his library to confront the Sheik Ibn-el-Said and the Kaid Abdullah.

"A friend is a friend at all times," said the old Sheik, salaaming low. "Thou didst wrong, my son, in not sending for us. Howbeit, when the tidings of thy marriage reached us, we straightway came. Is it not written: 'Thou shalt seek thy friend in the hour

of his tribulation?" Such is the will of Allah—praise be upon his holy name."

"You'd better not tell my bride that," laughed Hugh, as he warmly greeted his friends, who had come to testify that, to sons of the desert, where pursuit of enemies or tribute to friendship is concerned distance is as nothing.

THE END









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